

## **The Message of the Cross**

Matthew 16:13-23, 16:24-28

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Our second scripture reading this morning picks up right on the heels of the first – just after Jesus puts Peter back in his place. Peter believed that Jesus’ journey did not need to end on a cross in Jerusalem. Jesus had other ideas – about his journey, and about the journey of his disciples. Listen with me for the word of God...

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Then Jesus told his disciples,

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom?”

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There are about 90 miles between Capernaum – the place where Jesus started his ministry as an adult – and Jerusalem – the place where Jesus ended his ministry on a cross.

In Matthew’s gospel (unlike Luke’s and John’s gospels), the entirety of Jesus’ ministry takes place on a journey along these 90 miles. Scholars debate about how the length of time Jesus engaged in his public ministry. We read about Sermons on

the Mount, and healing miracles, and parables, and Jesus teaching his disciples and the crowds and imagine that these things reflect a lifetime of work. In reality, Jesus did all of this in about one to three years, depending on who you read.

In today's scripture, the end of the journey begins to come into view. It is as if Jesus and his disciples round a bend and see Jerusalem – the city set upon seven hills – rising up above them.

In the church we call this part of the journey Lent – a time that we set aside to reflect on the depth of God's love and to examine the ways that this love might reorient our lives. Lent began last Wednesday and it ends on Easter Sunday.

There are six Sundays in Lent – and this year the focus along our journey through this season will be to look at the cross and consider what the cross says about God and what it says about us.

I want to thank David Burton and Bobby Eaddy for making the cross that you see in front of you in the sanctuary. I asked David to build this cross as a tangible reminder of our focus during this season. We will be using this cross during our time with the children in Lent – adding a word each Sunday that represents something that the cross means.

There is, of course, another cross in our sanctuary – one that you have looked upon often (unless you sleep through worship on Sunday morning). It is a little less prominent, but sits right in front of the pulpit.

In 1959 the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago gave this cross to our church to honor the work of Rev. Dr. James Howerton (who was the pastor here from 1897-1906) and his son, Philip Howerton (who was an elder here), both of whom served as Moderators of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. This cross is hand wrought silver that was made on the Island of Iona, the place on the west coast of Scotland where monks from Ireland first brought Christianity to Scotland in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

In many ways, the symbol of cross is so prevalent in our culture that we can forget it's meaning. We see crosses all the time: On top of church steeples, along the highway, as stickers on the back of cars, diamond crosses that we wear as earrings or necklaces, crosses we plant in our gardens, renaissance paintings in museums, crosses in graveyards.

I am reminded of a story that Roger Nishioka told about shopping at a jewelry store on the west coast. Roger is a professor of Christian Education at Columbia Seminary. While he was in line to buy a gift for someone, the person in front of him requested the sales clerk show her the selection of crosses in the display case. "Which one do you want," the clerk asked, "the plain one or the one with the little man on it?"

How have we tamed the meaning of the cross?

How have we domesticated this instrument used by the Roman Empire to execute a revolutionary named Jesus into a commodity to be sold?

In preparation for this sermon series I read a book by the Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, called *The Cross in Our Context*. Hall taught at a university in Montreal, and he recounts that nearly 500 years ago, when the French explorer Jacques Cartier “discovered” the land, he and his men made their way to the top of the small mountain that overlooks the city, built a cross, and drove it into the ground of the mountain’s summit. By that gesture, Cartier declared, “All of this land now belongs to the king of France.”<sup>1</sup>

That may sound old-fashioned – but just five years ago when we lived in Louisiana a church petitioned the city to change it’s zoning laws so that they could build a 200 foot cross that would be visible for miles around so that everyone might know whose religion was triumphant.

How have we tamed the meaning of the cross?

How have we turned Jesus’ act of selfless love into a symbol of conquest and domination?

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Its actually not surprising that we often miss the point about what the cross means – Jesus’ disciples have been missing the point from the moment he called them to follow.

Consider Peter.

At first glance, you wonder why Jesus has to be so hard on Peter...calling him Satan and publicly shaming and rebuking him.

After all, Peter has been with Jesus on the journey for a while now. He stuck with Jesus through some pretty harrowing situations – angry crowds, hungry mobs, storms on the Sea of Galilee.

Peter has been a pretty good disciple. He even exhibits some leadership among the rest of the disciples. Did you know that Peter is the first of the disciples to recognize Jesus for who he really is? Up until today’s passage, Jesus’ identity has been a secret. But in this scripture, when Jesus asks, “who do you say that I am?” it was Peter who said – “you are the Christ.”

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<sup>1</sup> John Hall, Douglas, *The Cross in Our Context*, p. 36.

That's a significant thing – to recognize the true identity of Jesus. It means that Peter has been paying attention; noticing that these things that Jesus has been doing along their journey are more than special...that they are unique, and – in fact – a sign that Jesus is the long-hoped for Messiah.

Not everyone can connect the dots. God's activity in the world goes on all around us, but it often goes unnoticed. It takes a certain kind of faith to recognize the presence of God. Peter had that faith. He named for the rest of the disciples just who this Jesus was.

When it came to recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, Peter got it right. When it came to understanding what it meant to be – and to follow – the Messiah, things got a little off track.

This stuff that Jesus started to teach after being outed as the Messiah just wasn't making sense to Peter. Jesus was talking about suffering. About being rejected. About being killed.

Peter knew that this was no way for Jesus to talk!

After all, this was the Messiah – the Son of God – the hope of Israel and the world. This was the one who would root out wickedness and usher in the new Kingdom. The one before whom every knee would bend and every tongue confess. The One who would triumph over sin and evil and establish peace.

Peter knew that Jesus was the One; that Jesus was the leader of this new, kingdom movement. And for Jesus to lead a movement like this, it should be built for success. For something this important, things shouldn't be left up to chance. The movement should position itself to leverage power, to amass influence, and to expand the base.

The Jesus movement needed to be set up for the long haul – organized to survive and thrive...strong enough to last.

Peter was ready to follow.  
He was ready to hitch his wagon up to a star.

He and the others who had been walking with Jesus along this journey were ready to put themselves to use for the sake the gospel. Just give him a job, a purpose, a project – Peter was on board. This movement that Jesus started was looking like it was going take off – and when it did, all of those people back in Peter's little hometown who thought that he was crazy to drop his life's work and take up after this prophet from Nazareth would see the wisdom in his decision.

Everyone would see how true, and good, and holy this Jesus movement was as it grew in influence and stature.

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Because of all of this, Peter knew that Jesus must have had it wrong. How could rejection and suffering be the hallmarks of a successful movement? How could the denial of the self and a willingness to give up power be the pathway to effective discipleship?

So, yes...Peter rebuked Jesus because he knew better than to watch the momentum of this movement be squandered by a well intentioned, but naïve, Messiah.

And, yes, Jesus rebuked Peter – harshly...because Jesus knew that the value of success, and the measure of success that was in Peter’s mind – could actually get in the way of how the gospel calls us to live.

Remembering the time he was tempted in the wilderness by Satan after his baptism, Jesus knew that the ends do not always justify the means. Jesus knew that power clouds judgment. That influence chokes off courage. That self-importance can be an idol.

And I think that Jesus rebuked Peter so harshly because Jesus knew that Peter’s logic was tempting.

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Of all the disciples who struggle to understand what Jesus means when he talks about the cross, Peter is the one to whom we should pay the most attention.

We should pay attention to Peter because his struggles are our own.

“And I tell you,” Jesus said, “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

The temptation of the church is to trust more in our influence and power and self-importance than we do in the gospel.

The temptation of the church is to believe that the goal of our discipleship is success that is measured in the way the world measures success.

The temptation of the church is to make decisions based on the preservation of the structures and traditions we know instead of on the promise of our risen Lord to be with us always to the end of the age.

The temptation of the church is to believe that, really, we know how to manage and control the kind of movement that the Messiah had in mind, instead of following where the Messiah calls us to go and obeying what the Messiah calls us to do.

*"If any want to become my followers," Jesus said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will find it."*

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**Prayer – O God, when we are tempted to trust more in ourselves – and in our vision – and in our expectations of who you are and who you would have us to be – rebuke us by the power of your Spirit. Over these next few weeks as we walk in the shadow of your cross, O God, we ask that you would reorient us to follow the one we call Lord...and to trust that in losing ourselves, we might find life eternal and abundant. Amen.**