

*Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
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August 30, 2020

Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recording of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.

Today is the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to our worship.

As we begin our worship today, let us join together in a hymn of discipleship, because that is the theme of our Gospel lesson. Our hymn has a familiar meter, so perhaps a tune will come to mind as you read it.

***Take up your cross, the Savior said, if you would my disciple be;
Deny yourself, the world forsake, and humbly follow after me.***

***Take up your cross, let not its weight fill your weak spirit with alarm;
His strength shall bear your spirit up, and nerve your heart and brace your arm.***

***Take up your cross, heed not the shame, nor let your foolish pride rebel;
Your Lord for you the cross endured, and fought the powers of death and hell.***

***Take up your cross, and follow Christ, nor think till death to lay it down;
For only they who bear the cross may hope to wear the glorious crown.***

Our reading from the Psalms for this morning is Psalm 26, verses 1-8:

Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in integrity, and I have trusted the Lord without wavering.

Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind.

For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you.

I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites;

I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.

I wash my hands in innocence, and go around your altar, O Lord,

Singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all your wondrous deeds.

O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.

Our New Testament lesson today is from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16:21-28, an important text about the cost of being a follower of Jesus. It begins with Jesus talking about his future fate and being rebuked by the disciple Peter:

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

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?"

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon you can find it on our church website or open the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

Clearly Jesus was walking into a dangerous place. In fact, as the story is related by the Gospel writer Matthew, he seems to know the path he is taking will result in his death. Not surprisingly, one of his most faithful followers, Peter, attempts to convince him not to go. It may be simply Peter's love for Jesus as a friend that motivates him. We could understand that. It's something we might do for someone we cared about if we thought they were headed for danger. Or the motive of Peter might be more than that; you'll remember that, just now, Jesus has asked his disciples who they think he is, and Peter was the one who answered: "You are the Christ," he said; and he probably meant by that that Jesus was a person sent by God to lead a revolution against the powers of the Roman oppression. Jesus responded to Peter's confession by giving him the name "Peter" (previously his name was Simon). Peter means "rock" in the Greek language, and Jesus went on to say, "Upon this rock I will build the assembly of my followers." Was there a hint in that response that Jesus was leaving his ministry to Peter and the others who had become committed to the Way? A hint perhaps that the work was to continue when Jesus was no longer there, and that the revolution was ongoing in the days to come. If that was what he meant, it is understandable that Peter was not yet ready to understand it, since the image of the Messiah was the one who would personally lead the people of God to victory.

So when Jesus told his disciples about his vision of the future, it was surely disappointing and to Peter alarming and frightening and faith destroying – that the Christ should be abused and killed by the very earthly powers he had come to destroy. "What will we do without you," he seems to say. "This cannot be." Like a child who is afraid of losing a parent, Peter's response may be less about his concern for Jesus than his worry, "If we lose you, what will happen to me?"

Jesus seems to sense this. He rebukes Peter for tempting him to abandon his sacred mission, for the sake of his love for those who would be left behind. "Get behind me, Satan," he says, and tells him to be less worried about his human fears and wants than about how God might use us for the purposes

of God's Realm. Then he gives Peter and the other disciples a clear lesson about what gives life its meaning, and in doing so provides a way for them later to interpret his own death as a victory for life. This teaching is so critical to the Gospel that, without it, the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus might seem to be nothing more than a magical wonder tale of the supernatural. But if we hear this teaching and follow it in our own life decisions, Jesus promises that it will liberate our minds from their human bondage to self-interest, so that we may rejoice in the positive energy of the ways of God.

"If you want to follow me," he says, "deny yourself, take up your 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." We tend to read this word from Jesus more narrowly than we should, restricting its relevance only to Jesus and his original disciples, or perhaps to the early martyrs of the faith. It is a particular heresy of the Christian faith to believe that Jesus "died for us," and that we therefore need to do nothing for our salvation or the world's redemption. We are less inclined to think that Jesus' counsel to take up his cross and follow him was intended for his followers in our own time as well. What cross, after all, do we have to fear or to accept for ourselves today? There are martyrs, of course, in our more recent past – people who have died in defense of the faith and in resisting evil. We think of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoefer who died, John Lewis who was almost killed in Selma, and many people less well-known, who have put their lives on the line for their beliefs. They inspire us, but most of us do not voluntarily choose to experience their fate. It is their lives that we should want to imitate, not their deaths, and this is so too in our desire to follow Jesus.

It is in small things incrementally that we grow into our discipleship and learn to take up the cross of Christ. Like the Samaritan in Jesus' famous parable, we learn that taking the risk to help someone we do not know empowers us to be members of a wider community of life; or we meet an angel at the door when we offer hospitality to strangers; or we obtain our share in a wider human family by standing up for someone whose rights have been

threatened; or we receive the encouragement of prayer from someone we once helped with a needed gift. All these things entail a risk, a sacrifice of safety, a trustful act of caring that could cost more in worldly value than we receive. But without just that kind of dismissal of self-interest, we will never have the opportunity to grow into the fullness of our spiritual body – our home in God.

How ready are you and I for the discipleship that is needed in today's world? Part of the answer to that lies in our particular circumstances – our age, where we live, who our circle of friends are, where we work – what opportunities we have to meet and give support to those experiencing trouble in our society. Though each one of us is different, we can all make the calculation for ourselves: what can I do, within my own social context of family, friendships and community, to reach out just a little farther than feels comfortable, putting aside the considerations of my personal security, my financial benefit, my convenience, and my comfort, for the sake of helping the Realm of justice and reconciliation to grow in ourselves and our world.

Our Time of Prayer –

Today, let's use the words of a familiar hymn as our prayer that we may accept the cost of discipleship and experience its joy.

*Before the cross of Jesus, our lives are judged today;
The meaning of our eager strife is tested by your way.
Across our restless living the light streams from your cross,
And by its clear, revealing beams we measure gain and loss.*

*The hopes that lead us onward, the fears that hold us back,
Our will to dare great things for God, the courage that we lack,
The faith we keep in goodness, our love, as low or pure,
On all, the judgment of the cross falls steady, clear and sure.*

Yet humbly, in our striving, we rise to face its test.

*We crave the power to do your will as once you did it best.
On us let now the healing of your great Spirit fall,
And make us brave and full of joy to answer to your call.*

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom
come, Thy will be
done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and
forgive us our
debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but
deliver us from
evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and
the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.**