

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *The Church God Wants*
Service Theme: *A Church That Takes Up Its Crosses*
Sermon Theme: *The Necessity of the Cross (Sept. 3, 2023)*
Matthew 16:21-26

Do you know how shocking it would be for someone who lived in 100 B.C. to see this cross in the front of our church? How confusing it would be to see women wearing beautiful jewelry with crosses on it? How sadistic it would seem to see people with crosses tattooed on their bodies? Because to them, the cross was nothing more than an instrument of torture and capital punishment. Just like we'd be shocked to see a church with an electric chair in their sanctuary; or someone wearing jewelry with a gold pendant shaped like a noose; or someone with a lethal injection syringe tattooed on their bicep.

But although the cross was a brutal device, Christians display it because it reminds us of Jesus. However, this morning, that same Jesus forces us to wrestle with the question: are we as a Christians willing to take up our crosses and follow Jesus? We're comfortable wearing crosses, but are we comfortable with bearing crosses? Although crosses are shocking and painful, today Jesus shows us that crosses are also necessary-- His cross, and our crosses!

Last Sunday, God reminded us that he wants a Church that really knows Jesus, focusing on Jesus' identity through Peter's confession, ***"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."*** But while the disciples grasped who Jesus was, today's gospel reveals that they didn't yet understand what Jesus came to do as the Messiah.

This account marks a major shift in Jesus' teaching. We're told, ***"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."***

This was the first time Jesus explicitly told his disciples that he would suffer and die. But it wouldn't be the last. At least three other recorded times after this, Jesus warns his disciples that he would be go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. But notice, Jesus doesn't say, "I will go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...I will be killed and on the third day be raised to life." He says, "I MUST go...I MUST suffer...I MUST be killed." This wasn't just a prediction of something that would happen, but a proclamation of the necessity of the cross; a necessity that Jesus would willingly fulfill!

But Peter, who last week got a gold star for his faithful confession of Jesus' identity, now puts his foot in his mouth. ***"Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"*** Peter rebuked Jesus in the strongest possible way for proclaiming the necessity of the cross. But why?

It actually makes a ton of sense based on Peter's confession about Jesus' identity. Peter rightly believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One whom God had chosen and promised to send as the ultimate Redeemer and Restorer of his people! However, every Israelite had grown up being told that the Messiah would come to defeat evil and injustice, restore the kingdom of Israel, and make everything right in the world—by ascending an earthly throne!

They thought the Messiah would come and overthrow their political enemies and return Israel to the glory days of King David, redeeming and restoring his people through earthly power, glory, and dominion. So the notion of Jesus being the Messiah, while claiming the necessity of the cross not only sounded ridiculous, but impossible! How could Jesus be the Messiah if his path included weakness, death, and defeat, instead of power, glory, and victory?

Not only did the cross not fit Israel's idea of the Messiah, it also didn't fit the disciples' agenda for Jesus. Obviously, they loved Jesus, their friend and teacher, so they didn't want him to suffer or die. But even more, from their recurring arguments about who was the greatest, and who should get to sit at Jesus' right and left hand, it was clear that their agenda for Jesus also included their own power, glory, and dominion!

So, if Jesus was going to suffer and die, what would that mean for their hopes and dreams?

But Jesus, knowing their misunderstanding of what the Messiah needed to do, rebuked Peter, ***“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”*** While that sounds a little harsh, Jesus isn’t saying that Peter is Satan, but that his denial of the necessity of the cross was satanic. Peter was trying to convince Jesus to pursue power and glory, not suffering and death. Which is exactly what Satan was trying to do when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his earthly ministry. Satan tempted Jesus to avoid weakness and suffering, and pursue his purposes through power and glory. Because Satan knows that the cross was necessary—for our salvation! So Jesus rebukes Peter, because in trying to deny the necessity of Jesus’ cross, his mind was on earthly things, not the things of God.

Jesus couldn’t be the Messiah the people wanted, and the Messiah they needed. Because although the cross seemed appalling, it was necessary. But why? Why did God’s plan of salvation have to involve the gruesome suffering of the cross? Couldn’t God have just said, “Don’t worry about it, guys!” or snapped his fingers and made sin go away? In short, no!

In order for God to be everything he says he is, the cross was necessary. Last week, we heard God describe himself as ***“the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.”*** So, God is a God of perfect grace and forgiveness. And yet, God also ***“does not leave the guilty unpunished.”*** So God is also a God of perfect justice. While we might think God should just ignore our sins and let them slide, that’s not justice. And when someone’s sinned against us, and there’s no recourse, then we think justice is very important! But at the cross, we see the God of perfect justice and the God of perfect grace on display.

The necessary payment for sin is paid. As we heard last Sunday, ***“the wages of sin is death,”*** and ***“without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.”*** So, on the cross, Jesus dies and sheds his blood as the payment for sins. And he doesn’t just die physically. He suffers hell, the complete separation from his heavenly Father on that cross, as he cries out, ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*** At the brutal cross, perfect justice is carried out for the brutality of the world’s sin.

But the God of perfect grace and forgiveness doesn’t enact justice on deserving sinners like us. Rather, he willingly gives his one and only Son, willingly gives himself, to suffer that justice in our place. At the necessary cross, justice and mercy meet in Jesus!

God couldn’t just snap his fingers and make sin go away, because when there is forgiveness, someone always has to pay the debt. If someone backs into your car in a parking lot and causes extensive damage, you’ve got two options: Either, you make them pay the debt to fix what was broken. Or, you can forgive their debt and tell them not to worry about it. But in doing so, who will pay the debt? You! Because you’ll have to cover the cost of repairs. If God forgives the world’s sins and doesn’t hold them against us, then Christ needed to pay the debt.

And finally, the cross was necessary as an unmistakable piece of evidence of God’s love for you. If billionaire Elon Musk paid for your gallon of milk at Publix when you forgot your wallet, you’d appreciate it. But it wouldn’t be life-changing, because that’s not much of a sacrifice on his part. But if someone dove in front of a bus to push you out of the way, saving your life but losing theirs in the process, that would change everything! Because they were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, giving up everything for you! At the cross, we see God’s unfathomable love, willingly giving up everything to save you. Jesus’ cross was a necessity...for our salvation!

But Jesus doesn’t just say his cross was a necessity. ***“Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever***

wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” Jesus says that anyone who wants to be his follower also MUST deny themselves and take up their crosses. Our crosses are necessary too!

But what exactly are our “crosses?” By definition, the Christian cross is any sort of suffering a Christian endures because of their faith in Christ. That certainly includes persecution or martyrdom. History tells us that Peter eventually took up a literal cross, martyred via upside-down crucifixion. And martyrdom and persecution certainly might be realistic crosses Christians must bear, especially in certain parts of the world. And our faith can also result in relationship problems with people who mock, ridicule, or exclude us for our faith in Jesus. Those are crosses too.

But I think a more applicable cross American Christians often bear is the first part of Jesus’ statement. ***“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves.”*** That might not seem as brutal or shocking as literal crosses, but it certainly can be painful, can’t it?

As Christians, we’re called to bear the cross of denying ourselves, and following God’s will. That means instead of seeing ourselves as the lord of our lives, we take up our crosses and view God as Lord of our lives. It means dying to ourselves, our plans, our desires, our agendas, and living in contentment, peace, and obedience with God’s will for our lives. We only have to bear that cross as followers of Christ! And that’s painful and counter-cultural in a society that prioritizes subjective truth, independence, and self-accountability, and with a sinful nature that only wants to serve ourselves.

Even as Christians, we tend to compartmentalize our lives into religious and secular. We’ll let God be Lord in the religious parts of our lives, but insist on being Lord of the rest of our lives, the secular part. But to deny ourselves, and take up our crosses means there’s no compartmentalization! Cross-bearing means letting God be the center of literally every single aspect of your life—from your job, to your family, to your money, to your faith, to your fun! Even if it doesn’t

mean giving up your literal physical life to martyrdom, are we willing to ***“lose our life for [Jesus]?”***

That’s not easy. It’s downright painful sometimes, because that’s the nature of crosses. Even though Jesus knew his cross was necessary, he still prayed that his Father would take that cup of suffering and death from him. But ultimately, he prayed, ***“But not my will, but yours be done.”*** When it comes to Christian cross bearing, our prayers need to be the same!

But we can bear our crosses with confidence! Because Jesus tells us that the cross always precedes the crown. Notice that Jesus said he must suffer and be killed, but closes it out with a promise. ***“[I] must...on the third day be raised to life.”*** And when Jesus tells us we must deny ourselves and take up our crosses, he promises, ***“Whoever loses their life for me will find it.”*** The cross—both Jesus’ and ours’—comes with a promise. A promise of life!

We can bear our crosses because Christ’s cross reveals that God can use even painful, heartbreaking, or horrific things to produce the best purposes. We can bear our crosses, because Christ’s cross makes it impossible to say that he allows crosses because he doesn’t love us. We can bear our crosses, because they force us to cling to Jesus and to rely on his strength, instead of relying on ourselves. We can willingly deny ourselves and take up our crosses, because Jesus denied himself and took up his cross in order to save us! Because Jesus willingly lost his life, to save ours! Because Jesus gave up the whole world, so that he could gain our souls for his kingdom!

Because of Jesus’ cross, we can willingly take up our crosses. Because through both, he has your eternal life in mind! Unlike the rest of the world who are repulsed or shocked by the cross—his or ours—we can thank God for them, willingly take them up, and joyfully follow him, who first carried the cross for us.