

Sermon on Matthew 16:21-28
13th Sunday after Pentecost, September 3, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

When the Gospel and the Cross Get Twisted

Last Sunday we witnessed perhaps the high point of Simon Peter's career as a disciple, when he confessed Jesus as the "Messiah, the Son of God" – and Jesus proclaimed Peter "the rock upon which I will build my church". This was way in the northern-most region of ancient Palestine, in Cesarea Philippi, under the shadow of the Temple of the Greek god Pan. Jesus had just promised to give Peter the "*keys to the kingdom of heaven*" - which perhaps filled the disciple's head with visions of sugarplums and glory. It was to be a short-lived moment of heady thoughts. For in the next sentence, Jesus lowered the boom with a description of what it would mean to be this church, and how he was going to die. Jesus described to his disciples how he must go south to Jerusalem, where he would undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes, be killed, and on the third day rise.

This was all too much for Peter, now that he was "second in command" and the heir apparent to Jesus' new kingdom. This wasn't the kingdom that Peter envisioned – in fact, none of the disciples could imagine such things happening to Jesus. This message wouldn't "play" if Jesus said such things to the crowds waiting for him to speak. So Jesus' new chief of staff, Peter, took Jesus aside and told him so – that he couldn't speak of such things, for it was upsetting his base. He needed to get a grip on himself, lest everything he was building come tumbling down. So Peter told Jesus, "This must never happen to you!"

And then Jesus answered Peter with a stinging rebuke: "*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block for me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but human things.*"

You see, Peter, in his brief moment of pride in being chosen by Jesus for special responsibility, became confused about the mission Jesus was giving him, and the goal. Peter had twisted in his mind the good news of the gospel when Jesus called it "the kingdom" – he confused it with the kingdom he was familiar with, as shown by those kings called Herod, the Roman Emperor called Caesar, and others. He knew those kingdoms well, as they ruled by force and intimidation, their rulers had great wealth and lorded it over them. For Jesus to be forced to suffer and die by these evil forces that he and the other disciples wished to be free from, offended Peter. It was greatly disturbing that God could be vulnerable. They couldn't let this happen to Jesus! They would fight, and die for him!

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 lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Upon this riddle, rests the entire meaning of the gospel – and it’s a riddle few humans understand. It is only possible to live such a life of trust through faith, entrusting everything to God, being willing to let everything go – and who can do this? How can it be that in order to live, one must first be willing to die; and to attain the gift of life, you must first lose it, in the merciful hands of God? You and I can spend a lifetime of faith seeking to understand this great mystery. We might never understand it, but the truth is, we may actually be “on the way” to understanding just by living according to Jesus’ challenge. Perhaps the “process is the thing” – that the “life” is actually the “way of life” seeking to follow Jesus’ in his words and example. Which is why before the Church actually became a “religion” called Christianity, it was called “The Way” – the way of faith, following Jesus, seeking deeper truths of God in Jesus’ example. So we seek to follow Christ, but we never really “get there” to that place of understanding, because it’s not a “place” at all, and the kingdom is not a place either – it’s a way of life! And the “way” cannot be fully described, except to hear and tell stories of the people you meet and listen to on the way, who show you what God’s love and mercy look like, and surprise you and me by showing us the face of Christ.

Like the stories of human vulnerability and fear seen this past week, as we watched from afar the devastation wrought by Hurricane Harvey on the south Gulf Coast of Texas, as all of Houston and surrounding cities were submerged under water, and saw how so many responded to the danger with mercy and even heroic action, to pull people out of submerged cars and off rooftops, at great risk to themselves. It didn’t even have to be heroic to get our attention. For after weeks and months of becoming fatigued by the partisan bickering and hateful words and actions in our nation this year, it was like a healing balm to see neighbors acting like neighbors – black, brown, and white neighbors helping one another survive nature’s wrath, actually acting like people of faith, like Christians, Jews, Muslims, or no faith to mention, except that everyone acted humanely for at least a week!

It was just two weeks ago that images from Charlottesville, Virginia, were fresh in our minds. Visions of young white men carrying torches, carrying old Confederate battle flags and shouting Nazi slogans of “blood and soil” gave us nightmares, and brought back painful memories to those who survived the holocaust in Nazi Germany 70-some years ago. Seeing swastikas and tilted St. Andrew crosses on red battle flags renewed that image of the horrifying consequences when the power of the cross is twisted into a symbol of hate. The cross’s power as a symbol of God’s love and mercy when Jesus died on a cross that day back in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, can be too easily twisted in human

minds into a sign of hate and vengeance, against imagined fears and grievances, with dire consequences on those who are vulnerable scapegoats.

It makes sense, because the cross in itself is not a particularly loving symbol. It's a strange symbol, actually, to represent Jesus and those who follow him. The cross was always a tool of execution, death and domination – invented by ancient Persians and utilized most fully by the Romans to execute traitors, non-citizens, murderers and slaves. It was a frightfully familiar symbol to the people following Jesus, as revolutionaries and thieves were commonly executed and hung on crosses along roadsides and at the entrances to a city, to strike fear into the population and keep them in line. To use a cross as a symbol for Christians was to make clear that the cross no longer held power over them, when one had no more fear of death. To wear the cross would mean you follow Jesus, who was willing to give up his own life on a cross for the sake of the whole world, and for every person who wore that cross around their neck, or simply as a sign with oil on their forehead. To make the cross a sign of Christian faith means that we reject the power of hate over us, because we no longer fear the threat of death, and are willing to risk our own vulnerability for the sake of others. Not because we are so courageous or noble, but because we seek to follow Jesus and his example.

A symbol and concept so familiar to the world was bound to be twisted by some. In the last century we saw how the National Socialist Party under Adolf Hitler used the *swastika*, an ancient Hindu symbol meaning good fortune or “well-being”, which is similar to a twisted cross, and emblazoned it on flags and banners throughout Nazi Germany during World War II. It is now a hated symbol of Nazi devastation and hate, which led to the *holocaust*, and is now banned in Germany. During the Civil War, Confederate armies used a “Saint Andrew’s Cross” decorated with white stars on a red background, as a battle flag, in their defense of slavery as their “God-given right”. Though it was outlawed and disappeared from view after the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan adopted it, and the battle flag was flown in support of Jim Crow laws and segregation throughout the South from the 1920s and throughout the battle for Civil Rights in the 1960s. It has become a symbol of racism and racial hatred, used now mainly by white supremacists, Neo-Nazis and hate groups along with torches, burning crosses and swastikas in rallies for white power and segregation. These flags and symbols have inspired more violence in the past year, and so the confederate battle flag has been banned from some southern state capitols. It is truly twisted theology and a perversion of Christianity to think that battle flags and swastikas, and what they represent, have anything to do with Christian beliefs. They are not symbols of any *heritage* worth remembering, except to reject.

So our Christian response to the words of exclusion or hate spoken today by some who profess to be Christians, are stated clearly by Jesus – that we who follow him are willing to deny ourselves, take up our cross [not a flag] and follow him.

The Apostle Paul gives us a road map to that “way” of following Jesus and what it means in our daily lives, in our second lesson from Romans, which is my favorite passage in all Paul’s writings. Probably because he most closely follows Jesus’ words and example here! You can follow along if you wish. He said,

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints [whether they be in Jerusalem, in Houston, or your own hometown!]; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Of course, we know what happened to the disciples. Doing good has consequences.

But these are the healing words our nation and the Church need most today. What should we do as Christians in response to all the mess we are in? It could be as simple as to invite your enemy for a cup of coffee or a cup of tea. Have coffee with a Neo-Nazi? Hmmm. It could be more dramatic, like stepping out to give a helping hand in a natural disaster like a Hurricane or a flood, or to take some real risks. But it all begins with prayer, as you and I ask for God’s guidance and strength, as we gather as people of faith to confess our failings and our sins, hear God’s Word, and seek to follow Jesus with our next step. Maybe it starts with us making plans today to invite our neighbors across the street to join us for lunch next Sunday, and gather school supplies for children in our community who need our help. It’s very simple, really, and starts with very simple “baby” steps. It gets harder, and more complicated, when the way is less clear to us, or when we are challenged or experience “pushback” – or lose our nerve. But to start with, we sing, we profess our faith, we pray, and let God send us out into the world, with love and mercy, as we have received ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.

We pray for the millions of people of India, Nepal and Bangladesh who have suffered from devastating floods, and for the people on the south Texas Gulf Coast, from Hurricane Harvey. Keep us aware of our neighbors' need, even when they live across the world. Help them heal from their loss, and make us generous in our giving, as they recover and rebuild. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**