

Sermon on Matthew 16:21-28
13th Sunday after Pentecost, August 30, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ.....

Well, it was another week from hell if you continue to follow what is happening in our world, in our nation, and in our own state. We have watched in horror as another African-American man, Jacob Blake, was shot by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin, followed by days and nights of peaceful as well as chaotic protests, which culminated in the killing of three more human beings by a 17-year-old young white man with a long gun who crossed the state line with his rifle to join a “militia” of vigilantes. We see the wildfires in California and in western states burn out of control and destroy communities, and Hurricane Laura’s path of destruction on the Gulf Coast in Louisiana. In our own neighboring downtown of Minneapolis, people are so “on edge” that a suicide downtown led to rumors of another police shooting with stores and restaurants damaged and a curfew instated by the governor and the National Guard called in. Add to this the anxiety over the coming national elections during the week of the Republican National Convention, and it brings all of us to worship together on Zoom eager for some respite and peace with God online. Because the truth is, many of us are feeling anxiety, hopelessness and despair. I know, because several of you have shared your anxiety with me in recent conversations about feeling isolated during Covid, or afraid for our country. I share your anxiety! Thankfully, our liturgy of confession and absolution, Word and Sacrament, prayers and hymns bring us together to focus on this peace of God, with increased understanding and healing, which come through God’s Word and Jesus’s presence among us!

As we focus on God’s Word this morning, we hear from the prophet Jeremiah after Jerusalem had been destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Many of Jeremiah’s people had been deported to Babylon as slaves and a people in exile, and those left at home were subject to the oppression of Babylonian rule. Jeremiah had warned his people, that they had put their trust in material possessions and failed to worship God alone, but his warnings had fallen on deaf ears. God sought justice for all people, especially those who suffered from poverty or homelessness, but their corrupt rulers had neglected them and held on to their life of privilege, built on the backs of others. This led to great suffering. Jeremiah was frustrated because nobody listened. But in this passage he hears God’s promise to always be with him, even when his own people abandoned him.

Jeremiah’s struggle speaks to us today as people of faith. As the powerful shut their eyes and ears to the suffering homeless and poor, and praise God even

when this same God calls for a more just society, we are called to have compassion for the suffering and speak up for those immigrants being deported or separated from their families, who lose their jobs and homes, who don't have health care, or are treated unjustly by our broken criminal justice system. God calls to us for justice today, for every person, even when it appears unattainable in the moment.

We also read together today a song of lament, from a person of faith who laments the evils that he or she sees happening all around. In the face of evil, the psalmist sings a song of thanksgiving, recounting the wonderful deeds of God, in the spirit of love for being in God's presence.

Then we heard from the apostle Paul in Romans 12, who spoke about the Christian life called for by God. In a time when political parties declare their platforms in convention, stating what they stand for publicly to the nation as they seek support, one political party today did not declare any platform except to follow whatever their presidential candidate says or does. It doesn't matter "what" the party stands for – that will remain unknown – what is important is to support whatever action or statement or executive order this one person makes. In the face of this, we hear in Romans 12 Paul's summary of the "platform" of the Church, the body of Christ, when he says:

"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...Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to stranger. 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 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 heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:9-21)

What if THIS was the message this nation heard from Christians today, instead of seeing Christian megachurches follow a nationalistic, political agenda, or charlatan clergy lusting for money and power, lavish lifestyles and Lear jets, caught in scandals of sexual misconduct or misusing their office for riches, political privileges or a president's ear? What if, instead, people outside the church could look at us and say, "See how they love one another? See how they love us?" Once upon a time they did. But when they see us feeding the hungry after Covid shuts down our economy or social upheaval destroys grocery stores, donating

school supplies when schools are shut down, or taking in families who lose their housing or face deportation, then they may see it again.

So we arrive at the gospel text, in which Jesus challenges our human view of power and God's salvation even more strongly. Last week, if you remember, we saw Jesus travel to Caesarea Philippi, a city built by King Herod as a showplace of Roman power and Greek culture. A temple to the Greek god Pan stood there. This is where Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples answered, some say Elijah, or John the Baptist reincarnated. Some even said Jesus was a prophet, like Jeremiah. "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered for all of them, "You are the Messiah." And Jesus told Peter that he was the rock upon which he would build his Church, his assembly of believers – not a place of worship, per se, but a beloved community of believers who followed Jesus. Peter and the Church would receive the keys to the kingdom, a special gift!

But this gift was not all that the disciples thought it would be, and neither was Jesus! For the gospel says how Jesus showed the disciples that he, the "Messiah", *"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."* It was shocking to them. Peter took Jesus aside and said, "No! God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" But just as Jesus had told Satan in the wilderness to "go away" when Satan had tempted Jesus with bread and with power, Jesus told Peter, *"Get behind me, Satan. You are not acting like a rock, you are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind on human things."* So Jesus told them all, *"If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

A disciple by definition is one who follows. When you and I try to get out front, ahead of Jesus, we are likely to stumble and fall, or get in the way. When we are disciples we follow Jesus' lead, and his example, so that we don't mess things up for the whole church! So this is really a statement about what it is to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, which is our first, true call as the Church and as Christians – not to seek influence or power, like we see in so many proclaiming to be Christians today in America. We follow Jesus, not any political agenda, even though it is true that "politics" is meant to be, essentially, our life in public. We do have a public witness as followers of Jesus, it's just different than so many examples we see today.

For our witness as followers of Christ is to be vulnerable, to have compassion for others as Jesus did, to love one another and even our enemies, as Jesus shows us by his example. When Jesus said to "deny yourself", he doesn't mean to deny your personhood or your humanity, he means to deny all that would be an obstacle or get in the way of you seeing yourself and others honestly, as a child of God with great gifts but also human in your vulnerability, mortality, and

failures as well as your success. He means to deny all that comes between you and God, and your calling from God to be all that you can be, or everything that comes between you and compassion for others as children of God also. For the highest aspiration you and I can have is to be a faithful child of God, a “self among others”, living in community with other human beings, loving one another. So we have to dismantle all the systems today of criminal justice, immigration, education and economic systems that prevent or deny you and so many others from seeing yourself or others as a child of God, living in God’s abundance.

This seems to be a very difficult calling from God, a hard road, when we see the paths we would much rather take, that seem easier and less challenging. It is much easier to mostly seek your own pleasure, or to love your own self, your own family, your own “people”, to the exclusion of others not from your tribe. That is the path that some of our political leaders are holding out in front of us today, like an invitation to be on a “winning team”. But the truth is, as Jesus said, that we best find ourselves by seeking God, and following Christ on his path that leads to God. The best way to love yourself is to learn to love others, and to learn the most about loving God is to learn to love your enemies, or your perceived enemies, those for whom you have placed some barrier, because that is essentially what God has done for us when God sent Jesus, the Messiah, God’s Son, to die for us and rise again, to bring us all life forever. You and I can only do this through faith, with the power of God and in community with others.

So know this: when we follow Jesus, he will lead us to this life, as he has promised always to be with us, to walk with us and guide us on the path. You and I may stumble on this path, and too often we get a bit lost along the way, but let’s not be stumbling blocks ourselves! Let’s be disciples, followers of Jesus, and imitate him in his compassion and love, his forgiveness and mercy for one another. For in this we will find the true key to the kingdom, which unlocks the door to life forever, through love for God, for ourselves and our neighbors. This compassion, and this love for others, is the witness the whole world needs to see and hear today. Thanks be to God. Amen.