

**September 25, 2011
Pentecost 15**

"Cheer Up, Christian It's the Cross"

MATTHEW 16:21-26

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. ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" ²³ Jesus turned and said to 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." ²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

Some of you are into watching football games. Have you ever heard about football player named Roy Reagles? He played in the 1929 Rose Bowl Game for the California Golden Bears against the Georgia Tech. The Georgia Tech team fumbled the ball. Roy Reagles picked it up and started running for the end zone, running the wrong way, scoring a 60 yard touchdown for the other team. Throughout his life he carried with him the nickname of "Wrong Way Reagles."

In the words just read to you we find Peter going the wrong way as he tries to convince Jesus not to go up to Jerusalem to suffer and die for our sins on the cross. Only a short time before Peter made the bold confession, "You are the Christ the Son of the living God." Peter the Rock, becomes a soft marshmallow in the hands of Satan as he tries to discourage Jesus from going up to Jerusalem to fulfill his position as the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

I wish I can say I have never gone the wrong way or taken my eyes off the cross the way Peter did. But I can't. We boldly confess Jesus one day. Then the next day we find ourselves losing sight of all the blessings Jesus won for us at the cross and with his open tomb. We have opportunities to help other people learn about the blessings of the cross and we find ourselves being silent and ashamed. It is so much easier to talk about the beauty of God's creation, and how he hears our prayers, and how he is with us no matter what happens. The cross? Jesus, please don't ask me to talk about the cross to my kids, or grand children, or friends or neighbors. It is too difficult, too tough and too hard. I speak to myself with these words, "Cheer up Christian it's the cross." Let's see how Jesus joyfully went to the cross for us and how he wants us to joyfully bring the cross to others.

Jesus joyfully went to the cross for us

Jesus made it clear to his disciples that he had to go to the cross for us. "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, chief priests and teachers of the law, and the he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Jesus did not hide what he was about to do. In one of the other gospel accounts it says Jesus spoke plainly about his impending death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

It had to be unnerving for the disciples to hear Jesus speak about his impending death with such determination and even joy. The book of Hebrews tells us "for the joy set before him he endured the cross and the shame." In the psalms the Messiah joyfully proclaims, "I have come to do you will O God."

A human example of determination may help us appreciate the determination we see on the face of Jesus. On September 11, 2001 Todd Beamer found himself aboard the high jacked airplane that was heading back to the East Coast. He was able to talk to his wife on the phone through a dispatcher. The last words she heard him say were "Let's roll." There was determination in those final words as they charged the cockpit and caused the plane to crash in Pennsylvania instead of a hitting another target in Washington, DC. If you were there listening to Jesus describe what he was about to do on the cross for us, you would hear a far greater determination and love in his voice as he explained in great specificity what was about to happen.

Peter was taken back by the words of Jesus. The man who confessed Jesus to be the Christ the Son of the living God took Jesus aside and said to him, "Never Lord! This shall never happen to you." Peter loved Jesus. He could not handle even thinking about him suffering and dying on a cross for the sin of the world. Peter did not see the necessity of the cross the way Jesus did.

How did Jesus handle this loving response from Peter? "Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'" Jesus speaks to Peter as if he were Satan, because Satan was using the loving words of Peter to tempt Jesus to take his eyes off the cross. Remember how the devil tempted Jesus in the desert by offering him all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus was tempted in all parts as we are, yet he was without sin. Satan suggests: "Jesus, just think of the joy you could have if you used your power as God to make this world a better place in which to live. You could provide for people as you did with five barley loaves and two small fish. You could use your power to help them all just get along and love each other." The world wants a better place to live. It does not want a Savior dying on the cross for sin. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians, "The preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." By pleading with Jesus to not go to Jerusalem, Peter was playing right into the devil's plan to keep Jesus from going to the cross.

Satan never comes to you or me with the bold and defiant statement, "You don't need what Jesus did for you at the cross." He is far too clever and subtle for that. Martin Luther often spoke about the black devil and the white devil. The white devil is the one who comes to you looking pious and holy and even masquerading like an angel of light. He knows you won't listen to him when he tells you the cross of Jesus is worthless and you need to get rid of it. He suggests so subtly, "Why don't you focus on living your Christian life and getting along with people and showing them love and respect and improving your life. Let Jesus help you find the champion inside of you. That is so much better than a cross." In his book the Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis has an experienced devil telling a

younger devil how to destroy Christians by getting them to take their eyes off the great miracles.

Jesus saw the need for the cross. He saw the crowds of people and had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." I am born into this world wanting to be independent and do my own thing which includes opening up my life to sin. I even think I can save myself by balancing out the sin I have committed with good things that I do. Jesus looked at people. He looked at you and me and followed through with the plan to have all our sin placed on him and paid for at the cross. He did not hesitate to fulfill the prophecy in Isaiah that said he would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.

It has been said that Christianity involves two crosses. The primary cross is the one on which Jesus gave his life for us. The second cross is the one that Christians bear in this life as they are used by Jesus to bring other people to the cross.

Jesus asks us to joyfully bear a cross for him

Listen to what Jesus says about bearing the cross for him. "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.'" To illustrate what it means to deny yourself, I have brought along this faucet. You use a faucet such as this to turn water on and off. Ever since the fall into sin we have a sinful nature flowing inside of us that we inherited from Adam and Eve. This sinful nature says that sin is not all the bad, and that I can cover it up. If you have a cat in your family, you know how the cat is born with instincts that tell it to cover up after itself whether it is the kitty litter or the dirt in your back yard. Human beings are born with the instinct inherited from Adam that the dirt of sin can be covered with a little bit of good here and little bit of good there. The Bible leads us to deny ourselves and our feelings as it tells us that all our righteousness is nothing but filthy rags in the sight of God. I also want to follow my instincts when it comes to loving and caring about other people. I have this basic need to just want to get along with people by being nice to them and helping them be nice to each other. Everything inside of me says that is the greatest need in life in me and for others. But then Jesus comes and gives his life on the cross for me and for all people. I realize the greatest need in the world is not just love, but God's love, God's love that gave his Son the cross. That's the message that needs to be heard even if I feel like joining the crowd that says, "There are two things I never discuss and that is politics and religion."

Jesus said, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world and yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" The other day I heard in the news that Forbes has come out with its new list of the richest people in America. At the top of the list is Bill Gates and second on the list is Warren Buffet. What would it be like to have that much money? Think of what you could buy with that much money, or even more important how you could use that money to help other people. Both Gates and Buffet are doing just that. What if you could gain the whole world as Jesus said and use your power and money to make the world a better place. One thing I would do is find a way to feed the thousands of people that are currently suffering in Somalia. I would find

a way to throttle the Muslim warlords in Mogadishu and open up the supply lines to bring much needed food the starving, especially the children.

If my whole life was filled with deeds of kindness, I could not erase one single sin I have committed. Only the cross of Jesus can do that for me. If I could make the world a better place to live, and provide people with jobs and feed the hungry children, I would still not be able to keep them from perishing eternally in hell because of their sin. Only the cross of Jesus can provide forgiveness and peace with God. Later Peter the marshmallow again became Peter the Rock as he boldly confessed Jesus death and resurrection even at the risk of losing his own life. Peter was given multiple opportunities to talk about Jesus and his death and resurrection. In his great letter he wrote, "For Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." Cheer up Christian, it is the cross. That's your hope of being loved by God and that's your mission in life. Amen.