

“Confused Faith”  
Matthew 16:21-28  
August 30, 2020

When the first Persian Gulf War started in the early 1990s, the battalion commander of the Army unit I was in required all of us to immediately put together deployment packets. Everyone had to make sure they had a will, life insurance information needed to be current, and among other things we all had to get our hearing and eyesight tested. The eye exam simply involved reading different lines on the standard eye chart. So when a group of us were standing in line waiting our turn, we noticed that the eye doctor kept asking guys to read the same lines for each exam. We were standing behind the doctor who was at a desk while we waited for our turn, but we were close enough to the spot where each guy was to read the eye chart that I’m sure every guy was thinking the same thing I was thinking: Does the doctor realize that we can memorize the eye chart lines while we are standing here?

A friend of mine, named Todd, was next and he couldn’t see anything at a distance without his glasses. The doctor told Todd to take his glasses off and as he did the doctor pushed a button on his desk that changed the letters and characters on the eye chart. Todd didn’t realize this and he was hoping that the doctor wouldn’t notice that he couldn’t see things at a distance without his glasses. The doctor told him to read the third line, and Todd said, “GXB” and a few of us laughed. The doctor then said, “Can you read the next line down?” Todd said, “Sure, WTNHV.” Finally the doctor asked, “Can you read the next line below that one?” Todd said, “I think so, MSARC.” Finally the doctor said, “Ok, you can put your glasses on.” Todd then asked, “How did I do, (thinking he had fooled the doctor)?” And the doctor said, “Pretty good, except for the fact that the lines I asked you to read contained numbers, not letters.”

The way we see or don’t see life often shapes our life. What I mean is some people say that life is like a merry-go-round: sometimes you’re up, sometimes you’re down, and sometimes you just go around and around and around. Others say life is like a mystery, because you spend your whole life trying to figure it out. And I have heard people say during this pandemic that life is like a card game – you have to play the hand you’re dealt.

So what is your view of life? One of the many reasons that God gave us the Bible is to teach us how He views life and to encourage us to learn to see it in the same way. In our Gospel lesson for today we read a story of how Jesus saw both His life and the lives of His disciples. This text is actually a continuation of the story we saw last weekend of how Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was, in other words, how did they see Him? Peter gave this great confession of faith saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus must have been so proud. The disciples got it exactly right. They clearly saw who He was, but what we find out in our Gospel lesson today is they did not see life in the way Jesus saw it and they did not understand Jesus’ mission.

Soon after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus then explained that “He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised from the dead.” This didn’t make any sense to Peter. But Jesus saw life as a means to serve and sacrifice so that all could be saved. However, at this moment, Peter didn’t have that view. In fact, I’m sure he was confused. So “Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him,” as though Jesus is the one who is confused. Imagine what is going through Peter’s mind at this moment. “Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God is going to suffer at the hands of our religious leaders and be killed? That can’t be true. That cannot be God’s plan,” Peter must have thought. Yet when Peter expressed as much to Jesus, Jesus replies rather harshly by saying, “Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” That sounds pretty harsh.

Wasn’t Jesus overreacting a bit? Hadn’t Peter meant well by insisting that Jesus did not have to suffer and die? He may have meant well, but Peter had inadvertently tempted Jesus in the same way as Satan did when Jesus was in the wilderness after His baptism. At that time Satan had told Jesus that if He wanted to receive glory and honor from all the nations of the world, He didn’t have to die on a cross, all He had to do was simply bow down to Satan instead. Satan was offering Jesus great power without the sacrifice. He was offering Him a crown without a cross, but Jesus knew that there would be no crown for us if He did not endure the cross.

Therefore, Jesus severely rebukes Peter in order to get his attention. He wants him and the rest of the disciples to understand how they need to see life and how they need to act. So He says in verse 24, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." What Jesus is saying is the cross doesn't just define His mission, it also defines the mission of the disciples and our mission as well. Jesus' cross was made out of wood, but what does your cross look like? Many Christians often list things like loneliness, unemployment, family problems, or physical ailments as the crosses they have to bear, but while these are challenges that God allows into our lives, they are not the cross Jesus speaks of here in this verse. Jesus says that a Christian is one who denies himself/herself and follows Him. What does that look like? When we give to people in need, we deny ourselves and carry the cross. When you stop your friends at school from laughing at a student or from saying bad things about a student on social media, you deny yourself and carry the cross. When we follow the guidelines and protocols that our leaders have established during this pandemic in order to make others feel safe and comfortable, we deny ourselves and carry the cross.

Now this may not sound difficult, but denying ourselves is hard, because by nature we are all self-centered. Take babies, for example. They do not learn how to speak so they can complement Mom or Dad on what a good job they are doing as parents. They learn how to talk so they can communicate more clearly their needs and get what they want whether it's food, or wanting to be held, or wanting to go to bed. But this self-centeredness does not end when a baby gets older. If anything it probably gets worse. As we grow older we simply get better at hiding our self-centeredness and our desire for comfort by thinking, "If I only had a new phone, a larger TV, or more money, then I would be happy." But it never works out that way, does it? As soon as we get something new, we start wanting other things.

Deny your desire to accumulate more and ignore your longing to get your way, and instead lose yourself in Jesus. Losing yourself is not that hard, we actually do it in many different ways. Every time we get into plane, a bus, or a car where someone else is driving or at the controls, we entrust ourselves to another person. Likewise, if you want to save your life, then entrust it to Jesus, whose every word, every thought, and every action was never for His own comfort or convenience, but was always for the benefit of others – and still is. That's why we can deny ourselves and say "no" to our wants and desires. Jesus knows what we need and He will provide it. Spend your time and energy serving Him as you put others first.

Peter must have been stunned and confused when Jesus called him Satan, but had he really listened to Jesus he would have known that while the cross defined Jesus' mission, it wasn't the end as Jesus said that after He was killed He would rise again 3 days later. And it's not the end for us either. Those who follow Jesus and put others first will one day find that the cross has given way to the crown of everlasting life, when Jesus raises us from the dead to be free forever from our sins and their consequences. But before the crown comes the cross. The cross of this life as a follower of Jesus is when we live it as He lived it, and that means a life of service and sacrifice for others in order to do God's will. So bear that cross everyday, it's well worth it.