

Worship Service “A Big Ticket Item”

Pentecost 14, Sunday, Year A

3rd September 2023

Romans 12:9-21 NRSVUE / Matthew 16:21-28 NRSVUE

Prelude

Opening Music

[*Make Me A Channel Of Your Peace*](#)

written by Sebastian Temple, arr. by Martin Neary, performed by the Westminster Abbey Choir, posted to YouTube by Chet Valley Churches)

Welcome/Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty* 37

Call to Worship (responsive)

One: Join in the journey, and follow Jesus,

All: The way is not easy, but it is worth it.

One: Love one another, and serve one another,

All: Because those who lose their lives for Christ will find it.

One: Seek the Lord and live, seek Christ and know love,

All: Come, worship God, and know the Spirit is alive in you.

Invocation

Loving God, you call us to turn away from our own selfish interests, to take up our cross, and to follow you. To find our lives, may we live them in service of your mission. As we come before you this morning, give us open hearts and open hands. Make us eager to hear your voice and seek your guidance.

Open our minds to your ever-present spirit that is always moving within and around us. Open our spirits to your nudging and open our lives to your love.

Our Epistle reading this morning, provides a glimpse of what it means to be a disciple of the risen Christ. As we listen to these words from Romans, let's think about how we view our own journeys of faith, and how we live out that commitment to follow Christ in our own lives today.

Epistle Reading Romans 12:9-21 NRSVUE

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 affliction; persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue 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 arrogant, 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,^[b] for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord."

Instead, "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.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God,

In love You created us, and in love You sustain us, day after day. So it is with confidence that we bring our prayers to You, knowing that You hear us, and will respond.

We pray for the world around us, for the many who continue to suffer and call out for help: for those without enough to eat; for those caught up in violence and oppression; for those picking up the pieces after a natural disaster; for those desperate to find work to support their families.

We also pray for family and friends who are suffering: those struggling physically or emotionally, those working to overcome mental illness; those facing challenges at home or at work; those grieving the death of a loved one.

God, You have called us to pray for our enemies; to bless, rather than curse, those who deliberately seek to harm us.

We bring their names before You now—those who have hurt us, physically or emotionally; those who have stolen from us, or cheated us of what was rightfully ours; those who have spread rumors about us, or turned our friends against us. We ask You to bless them. Open our hearts so that we may see them as You see them, and be able to respond to them with Your love.

We pray for Your church around the world, that it would be a living demonstration of Your coming kingdom: offering hospitality to all, ready to help in times of need, showing love to friends and enemies alike, seeking to live in peace with all.

God, we praise You for Your faithful love, and for the mercy You have shown toward Us. Open our eyes to recognize Your presence in our lives. Give us grace to hear Your call, and courage to follow without hesitation, knowing that Your way is the only way that leads to life. In the name of Jesus, our Savior,
Amen.

Hymn *Will You Let Me Be Your Servant* 307

Our gospel lesson this morning continues the discussion between Jesus and his disciples from last week concerning the meaning of his role as Messiah. The path laid before Jesus is not what the disciples, particularly Peter, envision. As we listen to these words from Matthew, let's think about our own conceptions of Jesus, and more importantly, his expectations of us as his disciples today.

Gospel Lesson Matthew 16:21-28 NRSVUE

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he 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.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

Or what will they give in return for their life?

“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Message – A Big Ticket Item

We've all probably experienced it. We go to buy something and when they give us the total, it's way more than we anticipated. Whether it's a car or a pair of shoes, it can catch us cold when the total is far from what we were expecting. Shortly after I moved here from Pennsylvania, just in time for the winter rains, I went to purchase myself a good pair of boots. When they rang it up, I was taken aback by the total. I was used to a state that didn't tax clothing, and Washington had a little surprise for me that day.

Then there's the story of a dairy farmer that went to buy a new pickup truck. He had seen an ad in the paper about discounts and factory rebates, so he decided to trade in his old clunker. He chose a new model and was ready to write the check for the full amount. The salesman said, "Wait, I haven't given you the final cost yet." The farmer said, "Isn't it the price I saw in the paper?"

The salesman said, "No, that's for the basic model, all the options cost extra." So after the options were added, the farmer reluctantly wrote a check and drove off in his new pick-up.

A few months later the car salesman called the farmer because he wanted to buy a cow for his son's 4-H project. The farmer assured the car salesman he had several good milk cows for sale for \$500. The salesman drove out and selected a cow and took out his checkbook.

The farmer said, "Wait. I haven't given you the final cost yet." Then he handed the salesman a bill that read: BASIC COW \$500, Two-tone exterior \$45, Extra stomach \$75, Milk storage compartment \$60, Straw recycle compartment \$120, Four handy spigots @ \$10 each \$40, Leather upholstery \$125, Dual horns \$45, Automatic rear fly swatter \$38, Natural fertilizer attachment \$185, GRAND TOTAL \$1233. Whether you're buying cars or cows, it's important to get to what we call "the bottom line."

Our lesson from Matthew gives us an idea of the cost of discipleship. When we think of our faith, what is the "bottom line" of following Jesus? You may go into sticker shock when you discover it. Many people are only interested in the basic model of Christian living. They want just enough Christianity to assure them of salvation and make them feel good about themselves, without intruding too much on their lives. You don't find the full cost of discipleship advertised very often these days. Few preachers discuss it because it is unpleasant; it doesn't fill churches. The prosperity gospel promoted by popular preachers like Joel Olsteen says, "Believe and you will be rich and happy." Yet Dietrich Bonhoeffer gives us the sobering reminder in his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him to die."

In our scripture from Matthew today, Peter just doesn't get what following Jesus is all about either. He doesn't truly appreciate the final cost. In the section preceding today's reading that we studied last week, Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is. Peter gets it right by suggesting that he is the long-awaited Messiah. Yet what he thinks and the reality that Jesus presents are two very different things. The prevailing Jewish notion at the time is that the Messiah would be a triumphant ruler who would come with great power and majesty and ride in on the proverbial white horse to restore Israel to glory.

This is a far cry from the suffering servant image that Jesus presents. In fact, Jesus tells them that he must be shamed and die on the cross in order for his mission to be complete. This is such a shock that Peter naturally protests, and is seriously rebuked by Jesus. But is that rebuke really about Peter's concern for him and his misunderstanding of what the Messiah really is? Or is it more about how he still can't seem to get his priorities straight? Jesus all along has been preaching about living a kin-dom life, about ordering one's life around God's priorities. Yet here is Peter still focused on this very worldly view of what's important. For him it's about the here and now in this world, it's about the popular conception of a powerful Messiah who comes to set things right, and seeks vengeance on the enemies of the faithful. And while his concern for justice is laudable, Peter is still stuck in worldly thinking.

In that world, when someone was called "Lord," that brought to mind rulers and men of power, Caesars and kings. One did not refer to the meek and gentle with such a term. So for him to think of Jesus as his Lord, was to transfer these same images to the rabbi in whom he has placed his trust and respect. But for Jesus, this made Peter part of what he refers to as a "stumbling block." This path was not an easy one for anyone to follow, to knowingly choose to walk towards torture and death. Yet that was the fate laid out for him. This interchange is reminiscent of Jesus' temptation at the hands of Satan, the Adversary, in the wilderness, so it isn't so out of line for him to refer to Peter by that name. Peter tempts him by suggesting that his fate should not be one of suffering and death. Like Satan, Peter tempts him to use his power to seize a more triumphant future. And we know that Jesus struggled with this. He still seeks to find another path as he prays later in the Garden of Gethsemane, and feels forsaken as he hangs on the cross at Golgotha. So Peter's well-meaning thoughts were like a slap in the face to him, a temptation to stray from the future that had been laid out for him. But more importantly for us, he tells the disciples that their path is not necessarily so rosy either. They need to carry their own crosses; their journeys may also end in losing their lives. They need to be prepared for that to happen.

Obsession with self-preservation in this world can have serious consequences. This prescription isn't just for the first 12 followers. Jesus says if "anyone wants to be my disciple." That means you and me as well. We need to be prepared to literally give our all to follow Jesus. But it's not all about self-sacrifice. Our reading from Romans gives us a list of what it means to follow Jesus: Loving sincerely, hating evil, meekness, zealous in spiritual fervor, and truly caring for one another. But probably the most important, and most

difficult, is blessing and caring for those who persecute you, loving and caring for your enemies. We are not to seek revenge, to fight evil with evil, but overcome evil with good. That's a tough pill to swallow sometimes, isn't it? But the results can be surprising if we can muster the strength to show caring and kindness to those who would do us harm.

Watchman Nee, a Chinese evangelist, tells of a Christian he once knew in China. He was a rice farmer, and his fields lay high on a mountain. Every day he pumped water into the paddies of new rice. And every morning he returned to find that a neighbor who lived down the hill had opened the dikes surrounding the Christian's field to let the water fill his own. For a while the Christian ignored the injustice, but at last he became desperate. What should he do? His own rice would die if this continued. How long could it go on? The Christians met, prayed, and came up with this solution. The next day the Christian farmer rose early in the morning and first filled his neighbor's fields; then he attended to his own. Watchman Nee tells how the neighbor was overcome by a genuine demonstration of a Christian's love for others.

There's also the story of a little girl, who one morning, dressed in spotless white, with a lovely bouquet of flowers in her hands, passed by a boy who was playing in the dusty street. The sight of this pretty girl stirred the spirit of mischief in the boy's heart and in no time a handful of dust struck the clean white dress and spattered on her shining shoes. The girl stopped still. Her face flushed pink. Her lips trembled as if she would cry. But instead, a smile broke on her face and taking a flower from her bouquet, she handed it to the boy who stood waiting to see what she was going to do. A more surprised boy no one ever saw or one more heartily ashamed! He hung his head and his cheeks reddened under the tan and freckles. His unkind fun was quite spoiled because in return for a handful of dust someone had handed him a flower.

How changed this world would be if everybody, big or small, acted like this little girl! What a relevant story for the times in which we live. Our world is infused with such anger and bitterness. Social media has become a battleground. Such constant vitriol is so exhausting and demoralizing. What would it look like to offer a flower to those who disagree with us, who put us down for who we are or what we believe? So much of what fuels the hate and division is the sense among many that they have been forgotten and side-lined by the mainstream. How might things be or have been different if they had been valued all along?

What does it mean to you to take up your own cross? Are you willing to accept the cost of discipleship? Can you respond to hate with love? Too often we try to bargain our way out of thinking about the sacrifices we are asked to make, and turn salvation into a bargain we strike. We say to ourselves that "I'll do just as much as I have to in order to get my ticket to heaven," and set limits that we won't go beyond. Some think that saying the right prayer once and showing up on Sunday is all the effort we need to make. We try to make our faith something easy and attractive. And it is attractive and definitely has its benefits, but not always so easy.

In 1952, when the Betty Crocker company first began selling cake mixes, they offered a product which only needed water, and you would get a perfectly moist cake every time. But it bombed, and they couldn't understand why. So they commissioned a study and found that people weren't buying the cake mix because it was too easy-- they wanted to feel like they were contributing something to it. So, Betty Crocker changed the formula which required an egg in addition to water and immediately, the mix was a huge success! Many churches make the same mistake when it comes to "packaging" or presenting the gospel.

There are many who try to make Christianity as easy as possible, because they're afraid people won't "buy it" if it seems too hard to live. That's why people like what they call "prosperity gospel" churches. Churches that proclaim that if you live a good life, and pray for the comforts of life, God will provide you with the wealth and success you seek, and that's OK because that means God has blessed you.

The problem with that marketing scheme? Jesus said, "If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me, you will gain it. What will you gain if you own the whole world but destroy yourself?" Christ makes it pretty clear that our journey of faith will involve sacrifice, we will have our own crosses to bear. We need to be prepared to literally give it our all.

But it's only gloom and doom if we think about it that way. Too often we think of things in our life as "our crosses to bear" as negatives. We can look at it as wearing on our time and patience, or as an opportunity to live out the gospel. It can be an opportunity to be the face of Christ for somebody, or another reason to get us down. It could be the chance to engage others in demonstrating Christ's love for each other, or we can let it make us into our own martyr. Not that I'm minimizing the toll our struggles may take, but our perspective can play a big role in how we view the costs we're called to count. But regardless, we need to be honest that there is a cost to our faith, we do have our own crosses to carry. Whether we cheerfully choose to take that burden on and choose the life at odds with the world, or try to rationalize a different path, our Savior's expectations of us still remain. May we choose the same path laid out for us, as Christ's light and body in this world. Amen.

Call to Serve

If we pay close enough attention, when we look around, all we can see is need. But is that how you think God sees it? I think that as God looks around, God sees need, yes, but God also sees great abundance. God sees all the gifts God has already given us, and God sees opportunity. As a church, we are invited to look around through the same lens – seeing opportunity, gifts, possibilities around us while acknowledging the deep needs that surround us.

Each person here has something to give. And, each person has a need. I invite you to prayerfully reach within yourself acknowledging a need you bring today recognizing that every person around you brings a need, as well. As a church, It is our job, our calling, to join together and meet those needs.

A Time for Reflection

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

In your Creation, O God, we stand on the holiest of ground. May these gifts be a blessing to all that you have made. May needs be seen and met, and may the giving fit the need. Through Christ, who models infinite giving. Amen.

Hymn

Here I am, Lord

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Benediction

Abandon the illusion you're a self-contained individual. Be a part of this wounded world, and find yourself with Christ.

Set aside your own desires, give yourself fully for others; be the hands and heart of Jesus.

Renounce self-protection, accept your brokenness, and reach out for love.

Let go of your own plans. Join in the healing of the world. You will not be alone.

Follow your soul, not your ego. Follow it right into people's suffering. Follow it right into the heart of God.

Pour yourself out; let the world pour in; then you are one with the Beloved.

As we extinguish this candle, may we carry it's Spirit-light into the world with us this week, and be the beacon of the Beloved we are called to be. Amen.

Postlude