

September 3, 2023 Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

### Introduction and Themes of the Day

It might be that Jesus asks the disciples to hold off on declaring him Messiah because there's true conflict over what the Messiah is all about. One commentator depicts the heated exchange between Jesus and Simon Peter like speech bubbles volleyed back and forth. Every time Jesus says "Cross" his followers shout back, "Crown". Our present day wish for the Church to become prosperous, influential and highly attractive to the crowds may be a sign that the conflict over what a Messiah is all about remains our daily reality.

Gospel Reading                      Matthew 16:21-28

*21From 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. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 24Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For 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? 27"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. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."*

## Sermon

We need to get something out of the way while today's Gospel engages us: Jesus' words about self denial are intended for the church so we remember what we're about. His words were never meant to justify individual suffering or to exhort us to stay in abusive and toxic situations.

The very fact we stumble over this demonstrates how often we think in human terms; such thinking has its drawbacks like how cultures like ours emphasize the individual and often forget how connected we are to others.

There's much truth here about the church's identity crisis and much truth about what God's Messiah is truly about. And we are pitched headlong into the reality that we simultaneously stumble and we even trip up Jesus' agenda.

Having read through Matthew's Gospel this year, we might recall two instances of thinking in human terms:

Jesus faces temptations (Matthew chapter 4) designed to entice him to buy into the system as it is with some hope that power and status might be used responsibly and justly. Jesus isn't having it.

The other instance occurs when a famished crowd has only a couple of loaves of bread and a few fish among them(Matthew chapter 14). The disciples' concern is genuine when they suggest to Jesus that the crowds could be sent to villages to get food before markets close. Jesus has something grander in mind when loaves and fish are multiplied and surplus overwhelms scarcity.

Thinking ONLY in human terms trips us up.

The kerfuffle between Jesus and Simon Peter is about a collision of two ways of being—one of self preservation the other about self giving. I'll forgo chastising or defending Simon Peter. Matthew encourages us to regard Simon Peter as a representative for all disciples, saying and doing what the rest of us are probably thinking. Put another way, Matthew encourages us as a faith community to do some serious soul searching.

The historian Avery Dulles wrote that the church is often tempted to function as *dispensaries of religious goods* with the intention of securing a cushy afterlife for people.

Other times, we're tempted to serve as *chaplaincy to the culture*, where our prayers and rhetoric place the churchy stamp of approval onto whatever agenda the powers that be are advancing.

Professor Dulles echoes Jesus' call for the church to be a *called-out community of witnesses* to the realm of God—a realm that is both present now and is promised one day to arrive in fullness (his word was 'eschatological').

Jesus goes through a lot of trouble to form a community of followers, and he builds it not for its own sake, but for the sake of the whole world. And Jesus insists on the way of the cross.

The shouting match Jesus and Peter have scares us—and so does staring full on at the cross and what that means. We might shout "crown" as Jesus says "cross". Jesus has more to say—remember those words about finding life? He also says, "resurrection".

Preachers are supposed to quote only sparingly from their school days and professors. But as the late sportscaster Keith Jackson would say, 'this is a 'good 'un'. Professor Walter Boumann often said that the resurrection assures the church of the reality that "we have something better to do with our lives than to preserve them." That sounds a lot like what Jesus says about the church losing its life only to have Jesus hand life right back to it.