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Peace, Sun Prairie
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Pentecost 15
Matthew 16:21-26

LET'S FOLLOW CHRIST

What does it mean to follow Christ? Does it have to do with some sort of intuition about His presence with you? Does it mean using Christ as an example to follow? Does it mean taking things as they come knowing Jesus is in control? What does it mean to follow Christ?

In the Gospel Lesson today Jesus tells us what it means to follow Him. Following Christ means the cross. You cannot separate Jesus from the cross. Therefore, if you follow Jesus you will not be able to escape the cross yourself. But what does the cross mean for us? That's what we'll meditate on today for a few minutes. Let's follow Christ with our cross, to the cross, and under the cross.

Last week we heard Jesus congratulating Peter for stating correctly, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Jesus announced that the Church will be built on Himself, the Christ. Not even the gates of hell can stand up against it. But now listen to this change in tone: *From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised again.*

This must have been both confusing and upsetting to the apostles. Even more so when they put two and two together: "If we are associated with Jesus, and Jesus predicts such a terrible outcome for himself, then what does that say for us?" Maybe that was on Peter's mind when we are told, *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "May you receive mercy, Lord! This will never happen to you."*

Notice what Jesus does not do at that moment. He does not comfort his disciples. He confirms their worst fears: *But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."*

What is a cross for? Dying! Being killed! Christ confirms it, *"In fact whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* Maybe Peter thought, "Gulp! I was afraid of that!" To follow Christ we must take up our own cross. What did Christ carry a cross for? To die. Do we wish to follow Christ? The prince of lies says, "Come out and be your genuine self!" The Prince of Peace says, "Repent, deny yourself and follow me." We must die. I must die. Me. My SELF. My wants. My perceived needs. My space, my time. What feels good or seems right to me. To have the life Christ will give me, *my* life has to be over with. It means, for example, I smile and bless my spouse when she gets her way and I don't. I die for my wife.

But this is painful. I don't want to lose my self. I don't want to have to die. When Adam and Eve first sinned, the words "I" and "me" no longer merely indicated self-awareness. They became synonymous with "center of the universe," as in "I need that fruit; that would serve me." Two little words, I and me, that earn the damning anger of our Creator. In our fallen state those words still rage in our hearts: I, me! Consider how even in the most sanctified Christian prayer how much do the words "I" and "me" dominate and the word "you" hardly gets a mention. On an average day, how much do we go on autopilot with whatever suits me but fail to give what Christ wants any thought at all. We are guilty before God of self-worship.

Thus the cross is a symbol of guilt. It was a tool for executing the condemned. Christ says you and I have one. He wants us to take ownership of it. It's heavy. But let's follow Christ *with* our cross. Let's be condemned by

God. Let's admit that He's right. Let's be guilty. Let's not try to save a shred of our own dignity or rights or our own so called self-genuineness. Losing all of that is what it means to follow Christ with our cross.

But Christ was condemned too. Remember, He was on His way to Jerusalem. Told His disciples so. He was on His way to death –execution reserved for hopeless criminals. But His purpose in taking up the cross, or being taken up on the cross, was to be condemned in place of you and me. Christ was condemned not only by some jealous religious leaders or some mistaken governor. He was condemned by His heavenly Father. Christ truly gave up His life so that you and I could have a new life. The disciples largely missed it, but Christ did say that after three days He would rise again. Christ once said, *“I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.”*

Therefore let's follow Christ **to** the cross. Let's take the heavy, blood-pressure-raising, health-destroying, soul-crushing burden of our guilt and drop it at the foot of Christ's cross and leave it there. Christ has paid for it, erased it, deleted it, obliterated every last ounce of our guilt by His sufferings and death on the cross. Believe that because of Jesus you now stand before God innocent and holy –light as a feather and free of doom.

God brings you **to** Christ's cross at your baptism –washing all your sins away. God brings you **to** Christ's cross in the Lord's Supper where you receive on your own tongue the hard evidence that your guilt has disappeared – Christ's own body and blood that hung on the cross. And when Christ gives us forgiveness, He is also giving us life and salvation.

Following Christ means trusting that because of His death on the cross God has taken our guilt away and has given us a new life. Let's follow Christ **to** the cross. But then let's not walk away from it, only to return once in a while. Let's stay there. Let's follow Christ **under** the cross.

Following Christ under the cross means two things: It means suffering and it means being continually under God's grace. Dear friends, Jesus did not redeem us to a life of ease. He called us to suffer. But even as we suffer God's mercy and grace are ever present with us. Now that Christ has given us Himself for our salvation, we have everything we could need. Without any risk of losing anything, we can truly sacrifice our lives for others here on earth as Christ sacrificed Himself for us. Christ said, *After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?*

More often than not, one of the particular stings of suffering is that I don't get my own way. My self is denied. It seems so often like we suffer unjustly – when unexpected problems plow into us. It is especially painful when we have to suffer at the hands of others – even loved ones – when we have to endure their behavior. It might feel like we should retaliate. Rather, let's continue to find the strength, comfort, joy, freedom, will, and perseverance we need to live our new life, a god-pleasing life with Christ, by returning again and again for His forgiveness in Word and Sacrament. When we have to suffer whether because of our own sin or because of the sinful world we are assured by our baptism that our walk will be the same as Christ's - a walk in which God is ever-present with His grace and mercy – even as He said that He rejects the proud but gives grace to the miserable –a walk of suffering under the cross of suffering now but leading to an unblemished, unfading glory when Christ returns, That is what it means to follow Christ **under** the cross.

So following Christ is not a set of rules. It is not a how-to method. It is not a feeling. Let's follow Christ, first of all, **with** our cross by confessing to Him our guilt. Let's follow Christ **to** the cross by hearing His forgiveness and receiving it with believing hearts. Then, let's follow Christ **under** the cross by living the new life, a life of selfless service under His mercy.