

13 S. after Pentecost 8/30/20  
Matthew 16:21-28 17A

“IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW ME”.

The rioting, looting, and vandalism, statues being desecrated and torn down that we are seeing are symptoms that show the problem of every single one of us – “I want what I want!” Under that “battle cry” people have defaced public property, stolen from their neighbor, and hurt and harmed their neighbor in their body. I ask you: how can that possibly be justified? The only motive that drives such actions is sinful longing to have things “my way”!

Quite the opposite is the life and actions of Savid Johnson. I’m guessing that even if you have watched the news or read the newspaper, you have not heard of Savid Johnson. Mr. Johnson, SGT Johnson, was a 26-year-veteran of the Detroit Fire Department. On Friday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, he was enjoying the day with his 10-year-old daughter at a local swimming hole on the Detroit River, when he heard reports that three young girls were drowning. Ignoring his own safety, he plunged into the water to rescue the girls. After all three were safely ashore, people realized the father and firefighter was missing. His body was found the next morning.

I bring this stark contrast before you this morning because it is interesting to see how God so governs events to remind us again and again that we are to be Christ to one another, serving one another. But, we so often unlearn this lesson and go back to squabbling, and fighting, and hurting our neighbor.

In August of 2003, the Church of the Holy Cross in Midtown Manhattan, New York City, was broken into twice. In the first break-in,

thieves stole a moneybox that was situated near a candle rack. Three weeks later, the church was burglarized a second time. But this time, the thieves escaped with something much more valuable. They stole a 4-foot tall, 200-pound plaster statue of Jesus from the crucifix, but they left His cross behind. When interviewed by the media, the church caretaker, David St. James, expressed his bewilderment at this. "They just decided, **'We're going to leave the cross and take Jesus.'** We don't know why they took just him. We figure if you want the crucifix, you take the whole crucifix." In other words, Dear Saints of God, **"If you want Jesus, you must take his cross, too."**

This is what Jesus our Lord teaches us this Sunday, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me" (v. 24)."

But, we are too much like Peter. Just last week, we heard Peter's confession of faith, on behalf of all the twelve, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). Jesus commended Peter because he confessed the truth that Jesus is true God and true man. Then begins our lesson for today, "From that time Jesus began to show His disciples 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" (v 21). What was Peter's reaction? "Peter took Him aside and began to **'correct'** Him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you'" (v. 22). Yes, I know, your lesson in English reads, "rebuke," but really, the word means "correct". Peter corrected Jesus, because when Jesus talked of His passion and cross, Peter thought the Son of God had made a mistake!

Peter was trying to protect Jesus – as though the Son of God needed protecting – from the cross. He was, in essence saying to Jesus, “Avoid the cross. Take the easy way. This talk of death makes no sense. You can have it all without the cross.” Jesus rebuked Peter in much the same way he rebuked the devil, “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 (v. 23)”. And the “things of man” is glory, ease, not being inconvenienced in any way, shape, or form.

Peter’s heart and mind was set on glory, “I want what I want, when I want it!” Even when it comes to following Jesus. I will follow Jesus, and I expect to get my reward, I expect to receive some benefit. “Jesus, I will follow you, but on my terms. That means I don’t want the cross. Difficulty. Inconvenience. Pain. Sorrow. Anguish. Don’t want any of it, Jesus!” We want Jesus, but we don’t want the cross.

The Apostle Paul is really teaching us the same thing Jesus is teaching us with His words in our Gospel. Paul says this, “Let love be genuine” (Ro 12:9). Maybe we could think of it this way: We love John 3:16, the Gospel in the nutshell, right? But, John 3:16 is not the only verse in the Bible. Consider this.

“Do not let the sun go down on your anger,” Paul also writes (Ep 4:26). But, you do. You keep a record of wrongs and refuse to be reconciled, and you remain angry at your neighbor.

Ponder these words of Jesus, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone” (Mt 18:15). But, you don’t. You gossip and destroy your neighbor’s reputation, all so you can feel better about yourself.

Reflect for a moment on these words of St. Paul, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content" (Ph 4:11). But, you are not content. You have a house, home, a spouse, and a lot of stuff. But, it's not enough, and it's not good enough for you. You want what your neighbor has.

Jesus, who spoke the words of John 3:16, also said this, "I am with you always" (Mt 28:20). But, when the darkness of this present age overwhelms us, the lies of the old, evil foe and your feelings tell you that you are alone, that most certainly God has abandoned you. And, in the weakness of your faith, you believe it.

"Let love be genuine," Yah, ok. I will let my love **for myself** be genuine; love for what I want, when I want it. Love for God, love for my neighbor, nah, not so much. That sounds like it involves a cross.

Our Lord Christ in our lesson this morning is calling us to repentance. Turn from your sin to Jesus, so that He can do His work in you and through you.

The Good News for us is that Jesus did take up His cross and go to Jerusalem and suffered many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and He was killed, and on the third day He was raised to life again. And, He went to Jerusalem, His suffering, His death on Calvary's cross carrying all of your ego, your self-centeredness, your selfishness, your disdain for your neighbor, and all your sin. His blood was shed all over that wood so that you would be forgiven. And, He rose the 3<sup>rd</sup> day to bring that forgiveness, life, and salvation into your life.

And, He does that in the means of grace.

In the new birth of your baptism, you die to sin and rise as a new creation in Christ Jesus. In that blessed washing of regeneration, God molds and shapes you in the image of Christ, giving you the heart and mind

of Christ, that so that your love for God and for your neighbor, can be genuine. And, He continues to do His work in you as He speaks His words of forgiveness and life into your ears and feeds you with His life-giving Body and Blood at His table, so that every day you can pick your cross and follow Jesus.

So, what is picking up your cross? It means things like coming to worship, so God can do His work in you so that you can be Christ to your neighbor. Being kind and loving to your neighbor, even when that neighbor is a crummy person, who has hurt you and it not nice to you at all.

And, yes, it may be suffering – in body, in mind, in soul. If God, in His eternal wisdom should permit a cross to come upon you, Dear Child of God, no, no, He is not punishing you. We must ever remember that He punished His Son on the cross for all sins of all sinners. No, God is using that cross to shape you in the image of Christ. And, as He does His work in you, He is with you, giving you patience, and strength, and fixing your eyes on heaven, where He will wipe all His tears from your eyes and you will rest from all our earthly struggles.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.