

Comfortable or Comforted?

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Matthew 16:21–28

Last week, Tammi and I were visiting our daughter in Colorado Springs. It was a great visit. Colorado is so beautiful — not *more so* than our region of New York, but *differently* beautiful, painted with arid browns and reds rather than leafy greens. Tammi and I enjoyed that beauty, with some great outdoor walks, all of it with our eldest, now adult, child who continues to fill us with such pride and delight.

One of our days there we visited the US Air Force Academy, and we made sure to see the chapel. I'm so glad we did. It was quite beautiful.

What I didn't know about the chapel until we got to it is that it actually contains *four* chapels. The large chapel on the main floor at the top of the steps coming from the pedestrian mall is the Protestant Chapel. But below it is a bit smaller Catholic chapel, as well as two other small areas, one a Jewish chapel and the other a Buddhist meditation room. Each of the four are beautiful, but differently so, beautiful in their own way, appropriate to the religious tradition they are intended to serve.

One of the things that the Protestant and the Catholic chapels have in common with each other is the prominent display of a cross. In each chapel, there is a cross suspended from the ceiling front and center. Each cross is designed and located to indicate its central importance in that space. Each one marks its chapel as a distinctly Christian place of worship.

But there are differences.

Technically, the cross in the Roman Catholic chapel is a “crucifix.” It has on the cross a depiction of the suffering Christ. Jesus is on that cross, which differs from the cross in the Protestant chapel (and in our sanctuary, too, of course), which is bare.

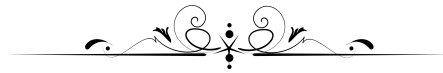
Now, you may have learned the same as I did years ago, that there's a theology behind the bare Protestant cross. The cross is bare, I learned, because Jesus is risen. The empty cross reflects our belief in the resurrection of Jesus. And, as often happens with our theological emphases, this positive affirmation is often then used to point an accusing finger at the Catholic crucifix, which supposedly wants to keep Jesus on the cross, denying him his resurrection.

I have to tell you: my experience in the two chapels did not fit neatly into what I had long ago been taught about crosses and crucifixes.

The cross in the Air Force Academy's Protestant chapel was big. Actually, for as big and centrally located as it was, I didn't notice it right away, its massive size and shiny, aluminum construction serving to make it almost blend in with the rest of the room. Not only was it big. It was also beautiful. I think maybe too big, and too beautiful. It was a sign of triumph, a symbol of victory. It was perfect, and ethereal, and remote. From it one might never know that on a cross Jesus suffered and died, and that his suffering and dying lie at the center of the Christian faith.

The crucifix in the Catholic chapel was smaller. But for some reason I found it more noticeable, placed so that my eye was drawn to it right away. And, of course, it had on it the suffering Christ. But I felt then, and have reflected on quite a bit thereafter, that the point of this image of our Lord's suffering was not to ignore the resurrection nor to keep Jesus in the past, but instead to convey that the suffering of Jesus has an ongoing reality and importance, and all those who would worship and serve him must keep his suffering as the life-giving center of their own lives.

Which brings me to Peter.



I'm not sure I can blame him.

Really, I think I understand where Peter was coming from.

He loved Jesus.

He was devoted to Jesus.

He had given up everything to follow Jesus,
to learn from Jesus,
to serve Jesus.

He would do anything for him.

After all, Peter knew that Jesus was not your average holy man. In fact, just before, Peter had declared his faith in Jesus, insight and belief given to him by God, saying to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

So Peter knew that the future was very bright for Jesus ... and for all those who were close to him. There was victory coming, Peter just knew it, a victory prepared and blessed by God, with Jesus at the center.

So when Jesus starts telling Peter and his fellow disciples about things to come, about horrible things Jesus expects to happen, that these horrible things were necessary, "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" (that last part maybe unnoticed because of all the noisy violence in what comes before), when Jesus says this, I can understand Peter's reaction:

"God forbid it, Lord! No way is this going to happen to *you!*"

Obviously, Peter needed to encourage Jesus, to give him a little boost. Peter had a responsibility to keep his master's momentary bout with uncertainty and self-doubt from discouraging the other disciples and causing them to doubt.

Poor Jesus. He needs a pep talk.

But Jesus answers Peter. And his answer sounds harsh.

"Get behind me, Satan."

Now, I expect that Peter was not used to being called "Satan." But Jesus is not confused. He does not mistake his most devoted disciple for the Prince of Darkness. He is not just being mean.

Instead, Jesus is telling Peter that all his well-meaning words of caution were just as deceptive, just as mistaken, just as designed to tempt Jesus from his appointed path, as were the words of the devil who had tempted him in the wilderness.

And when Jesus tells Peter to “get behind” him, he’s not telling him to get lost. Instead, he’s telling Peter to follow Jesus, to get along behind him, in line, to follow him wherever he goes, follow him even on a road that leads to the cross with its suffering and death. Because only in such following, with the cross as its central fact, can Peter really claim to know Jesus, and really expect to live.

*If any want to become my followers,
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.*



We see crosses fairly often these days.

As jewelry. Woven into fabrics to be worn or to be flown as flags. Tattooed onto skin.

We see crosses on signs identifying places of safety and shelter following disasters such as Hurricane Harvey, as the good people of the Red Cross seek to help the suffering.

We see crosses on the robes and uniforms of white supremacists and neo-Nazis on the march.

The cross, for some, is a symbol of power, for others a symbol of violence, for still others it’s a status symbol.

For many, it seems, it’s decoration.

The cross, for some stands for

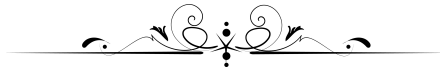
conformity,
or exclusivity,
or superiority,
or nationality.

And almost all of these are denials of the cross of Christ,

or evasions,
or perversions,
or distortions,
or desertions.

They are modern-day echoes of Peter, telling Jesus that suffering cannot be his destiny nor a violent death his end.

And I wonder, if Jesus, when he looks on these, says again, “Get behind me, Satan.”



You see, the cross is the way of Jesus. To suffer and die so that

the lost may be found,
the sinning may be redeemed,
the broken may be made whole,
the dead may be brought to life:

this is what Jesus does. It is what he must do. It is the central activity of his life and work.

Some want to get away from that. Some want to confine the meaning of Jesus to his moral teaching. And certainly, his moral teaching is tremendously important. But what Jesus *taught* is deeply bound up with and points decisively to what Jesus *did*. And the center of what he did is his willingly enduring death for those whom he taught. We cannot truly understand his teaching, really we cannot *accept* and be *formed* by his teaching, if we do not accept that he died so we may live.

This is a comfort, holy and dear to those blessed to know Jesus. But it is also a curious kind of comfort. Because it tends to make many uncomfortable. The suffering and death of Jesus on the cross was made necessary by the depth and extent of human sin. And this sin was not confined to those who at the time shouted their approval of Christ's execution. It is a stain all of us today share and perpetuate.

The love of God in Jesus Christ is the divine answer, not to how *good* we are, but rather to how *bad* we are. And the thing is, many don't want to talk about the bad, to acknowledge it and accept it, but instead they fancy that we are not so bad, that we are all (or most of us, anyway) quite good.

The cross of Jesus is meant to shake us, to discomfort us, to lead us to an acceptance

of our guilt,
our need,
our weakness,
our pettiness,
our falsehood,
our *sin*.

But there's even more about the cross, an uncomfortable "more" that can make many of us behave like Peter: "God forbid it, Lord!" And it is this: if we are to be drawn even nearer to Jesus, to be more deeply comforted by him, then we must see the cross not only as *his* way, but as *ours* also. Just as we must see in his life our own life, we must also see in his death our own death:

as we die to sin, and selfishness, and falsehood;
as we put to death within us our idols of greed, and lust, and comfort;
as we submit ourselves to the way of the cross;
as we follow the Lord Jesus, and bear witness to him, and confess him,
even if it would mean our suffering, our death,
the loss of friends, and treasure, and health, and even life,
should he call us to that.

Because the cross, as the symbol of Christ's supreme love and saving grace, surely is supposed to comfort us. But it is not supposed to make us comfortable. No, the cross should both comfort us *and* make us uncomfortable. It should lead us to question our seriousness and devotion whenever we get comfortable.

The cross does not tell us: "Jesus went there so we don't have to." Instead, it tells us "because for you Jesus went to *his* cross, you can, and may, and must go to *yours*."

It tells us that God's love for us is more valuable than all worldly comforts.

It tells us that to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ is an honor and a privilege.

This, my dear friends, is a comfort that is far deeper than all that makes us comfortable.

So, my friends, look to the cross of Christ. And from it may we learn how to take up our own crosses, and follow.