

We continue reading from the gospel according to Matthew today. We have been reading through much of this gospel over the past several weeks as we have been following the lectionary, the passages assigned to each Sunday of the year.

Matthew is included in the Bible as the first of the four gospels in the New Testament that provide us stories about the life of Jesus. Matthew and Mark are considered the oldest of the four gospels as they were shared orally for some 40 or so years before they were written down. We continue today by reading from the 16th chapter.

This part of the chapter is going to show a shift in focus for Jesus. Whereas in previous stories Jesus seems focused on crowds of people here we see an emphasis upon the small group of disciples. Jesus begins preparing them for what they will be facing ahead.

Last week we left off with Jesus telling Simon Peter, “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.” I mentioned last week that Catholics interpret this text as meaning that the church will be built upon the person of Peter.

Protestants have traditionally interpreted this text differently to mean that it is Peter’s testimony in Jesus as the Christ or Messiah that is the foundation for the church. Either way, the image of Peter as a rock is lifted up as a positive image and Peter is presented as a positive character.

The positive image of Peter will shift dramatically in what we are about to read. Peter the rock is going to become Peter the stumbling block. Peter the rock is going to be accused of being a tool of Satan and the forces of darkness. A very quick turn-a-round.

Read Matthew 16:21-28

In the last week or so there is a picture that is being shared on Twitter and other social media sites on the internet. It is a sticker found on the back of a car. Here it is.

<http://www.boredpanda.com/tuna-shamed-car-bumper-sticker-the-blueprint/>

Can you tell what has gotten people laughing about this sticker? Several people in seeing this picture are wondering why tuna are being shamed. Why would someone want to shame tuna?

What has tuna done to them that they need to shame tuna? Others have wondered if our faith flounders and we can't put our trust in tuna and that we should instead place our trust in cod. I did not write that. I only am reporting.

Of course, the person that put that sticker on that car wanted to make a statement that they were not ashamed of the cross. They wanted to profess that they were not ashamed to be a Christian. But when others saw that sticker they saw something very different. In fact, I read some people's posts that they couldn't figure out for the longest time what the sticker was actually supposed to mean.

So here we have a situation where the meaning of the cross means something different to different people. Differences of opinion on what the cross means is what this story that we read is all about.

Jesus is teaching about what is going to happen to him and then Peter pulls Jesus aside. "Jesus," Peter shares passionately. "You can't be talking about being killed. That's not good for us."

Jesus responds with some very harsh words toward Peter for pulling him aside. Peter must have been shocked at what he heard from Jesus. "Get behind me, Satan!! You are a stumbling block to me!" Not exactly what Peter expected to hear from Jesus.

Jesus then shares words which may be somewhat familiar to many of us. Jesus says to the disciples that "If any want to become my followers they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow." So what exactly does that mean? What does it mean to take up a cross and follow?

Remember what the cross meant at the time. The cross was an object which was used by the Roman authorities to exert power and control. The cross was the principal and most painful method of capital punishment by the Romans. To the disciples, including Peter, the cross was a terrifying symbol. But Jesus tells them that they must pick up their cross and follow.

And how did these early followers interpret these words from Jesus? Peter's response leads us to believe that the disciples saw the cross in the same way as the Romans did. As a symbol of force and violence.

Peter and the other disciples want Jesus to show more force and violence than the Romans. They want him to defeat the Romans through a violent overthrow like they were used to seeing.

But Jesus gives them a different interpretation of the cross. Rather than violence and force, Jesus shows them a cross of forgiveness, sacrifice, mercy, and love. Jesus challenges the powerful not with more violence but with forgiveness and mercy, sacrifice, and love.

Jesus knows something that we have a hard time grasping. When we respond to violence with violence then this just creates more violence. There will always be someone who comes along who tries to be more forceful and more violent.

And violence does not just mean physical violence. Violence can be the harsh words we say to others and about others and what we write on social media about others. We can use violent and harsh words about friends, family, and people in the news like political leaders and entertainers. Some of us can be very violent with the words we say and the words we write.

But Jesus knew there was a different way to respond to force and violence and that was with forgiveness, sacrifice, mercy, and love.

So what does the cross mean for us today? For some of us in our culture, the cross has become a political statement. Sometimes people use a cross to give weight and authority to whatever political statement they are trying to make.

Sometimes people erect crosses for intimidation as we know the KKK has done. For many of us the cross is a symbol of identification as a follower of Jesus Christ.

But today I want to invite us to see the cross as a symbol of something else also. I invite us to see the cross as a symbol of freedom. The cross is, of course, an intersection of two lines. The cross is a crossroads of divergent paths. One way on the cross heads horizontally while the other direction heads vertically. At the intersection of the two lines is the crossroad.

I invite us to see the center of the cross as an opportunity to escape force and violence with our words and actions and instead adopt forgiveness, mercy, sacrifice, and love. If we choose to address issues with violence and force then we will be following the path that is set out in our world and culture.

If we choose to address issues with forgiveness, mercy, sacrifice, and love then we will be following the path set forth by Jesus. The center of the cross is our point of decision. Violence and force with our words and actions or forgiveness, mercy, sacrifice, and love?

So what does that look like for us? For us to practice the ways of Christ verses the powers of darkness then it takes imagination. I end with an example of how a friend of mine is using imagination to address something that all of us know something about. And that is our birthday.

Usually when we think of upcoming birthdays we think about actions or presents that people will do for us. Some of us look forward to birthdays while others of us dread our birthdays. Let me read to you a letter I just received this week.

(Letter from family of Marge Kitterman to honor her 80th birthday by inviting others to do a random act of kindness and tell her about your act in a birthday card)

So how about us? Are we going to follow the ways of the world and use force and violence in our words and actions? Or are we going to follow the ways of Christ and share forgiveness, mercy, sacrifice, and love?

If you want to do a random act and kindness and write a birthday card to Marge Kitterman I will give you her address in Fort Mill.

Look at the cross and decide which direction you wish to go. AMEN.

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-Given: September 3, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)