

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 30, 2020

Introduction

I thoroughly enjoy the three-year common lectionary readings that most ELCA pastors and churches follow each year. Important themes are emphasized. For example, last week's Gospel from Matthew 16:13-20 tells the story of Jesus' questions to the disciples on the road to Caesarea Philippi. This week's Gospel, vv.21-28, continues as Jesus explains the implications for disciples of Peter's answer to the question: *WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?*' The earlier verses establish the basis of discipleship [Jesus, the Messiah] and what it means for those who follow Jesus. Jesus is very concrete when he tells them that true discipleship involves self-denial and, quite possibly, suffering and rejection by family and friends.

In previous journeys through the lectionary, I have used a variety of methods to develop homiletical themes around these consecutive Gospel readings. This year I have chosen to share three brief stories to illustrate the implications of following Jesus as disciples. The first comes from the Arthurian legends of England; the second from last week's and today's Gospels; and the third from our community of faith. I hope you enjoy this approach and see a clearer picture of Matthew's understanding of discipleship.

Pastoral Note

We continue to live under the specter of the coronavirus. It is still very real and we must continue to be cautious with the use of masks, social distancing, and restrictions on group gatherings. Our synod's *Covid-19 Response Task Force* has met via ZOOM and we will be monitoring infection rates in our geographic area; especially as schools begin to open. Remember, the church is not a building; but rather, a community of faith that follows Jesus.

Please note that we will be doing outdoor parking lot worship on August 30, September 13, and September 27 at the usual times: Bethel – 8:30 am and Immanuel – 10:30 am.

In Christ ✝,

Pastor Steve

Gospel – Matthew 16.21-28

“Once upon a time, there was a . . .”

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, when our world is tumbling down, you alone are the foundation of our lives. Your constant love bears us up; your insistent call reminds us who we are; and your constant presence gives us life. But Lord, we are sinners. We are reluctant disciples whose roots in this world are strong and whose faith is weak. We fear hardship and sacrifice for your sake. We reserve ourselves as if some more important task will claim us. Forgive us and heal our unbelief. Wash us in your Holy Spirit and make us better disciples. Strengthen our faith in the One who sent you and open us to his transforming love. Lord Jesus, give us this day the courage to take up our crosses and follow you. In your name we pray. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Once upon a time, long ago in Camelot, there lived a knight of great renown. He was strong and brave and had no equal in the arts of war. Whether tournament or battle, the victory was always his. The Master Knight was the king’s champion. And in all the land, there was none so strong, so noble or so grand as he.

One day, King Arthur challenged his knights to a quest . . . A holy quest certain to bring peace to their souls and glory to the Lord Jesus. The king charged them all to seek the Holy Grail – the very cup from which the Lord and his disciples drank the Blessed Sacrament. The royal champion knew the perils of the road and the difficulty of the quest. But in his pride, the Master Knight believed that he alone could fulfill the king’s sacred charge. He would find the Grail and lay the holy treasure before his king.

So, with sharpened sword and polished armor, the mailed knight began his quest. The prayers of king and crowd sped him on his way. But as he approached the city gate, he saw an aged beggar laying across the road. His body was covered with filthy rags, his skin with festered sores. Accursed by the rich and shunned by the poor, the beggar lifted his hand to the knight and cried out, “*Help me, kind sir, lest I die.*” Amidst the cheers of the crowd, the Master Knight was heard

to say, *“I have no time, for the Grail awaits me. I must serve my Lord.”* He then turned his horse to the forest and disappeared from sight.

The tale of the Master Knight is too long to tell. Legends tell of the great battles won and dragons slain, but wherever he looked, the Holy Grail was not to be found. As one year followed the next, the luster of his armor dimmed and his sword became dull. What once was child’s play for one so great, now became a loathsome task. The prayers of Camelot mocked the Master Knight. So great was the hope; yet even greater, his failure. A broken man, the Master Knight knew that the Grail was not his to find. There remained but one part of his adventure . . . the part most dreaded. He must return to his king.

The way to Camelot was long and hard. Carrying a staff instead of a sword, wearing sackcloth in place of mail, the Master Knight journeyed home. With no horse to bear him, he walked in the company of the poor. He shared their bread, he cared for their sick, and he dressed their wounds. The one who once laughed at death, now wept when they died. Older and wiser, the Master Knight came to Camelot and his king.

When he approached the gate of the city, he saw an aged beggar laying across the road. His body was covered with filthy rags, his skin with festered sores. Accursed by the rich and shunned by the poor, the beggar lifted his hand to the knight and cried out, *“Help me, kind sir, lest I die.”* *“How can this be?”* thought the knight, *“It’s the same man as before.”* Cradling the beggar’s head in his arms, the Master Knight said, *“Take my water and my food. Let me wash your sores and dress your wounds. This time, I shall care for you.”*

Then, in a blinding light he saw that it was no longer was the beggar, but the Lord Jesus. And Jesus said, *“MASTER KNIGHT, YOUR QUEST IS ENDED. IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, LET THEM DENY THEMSELVES AND TAKE UP THEIR CROSSES AND FOLLOW ME. FOR WHOEVER WOULD SAVE THEIR LIFE WILL LOSE IT, AND WHOEVER LOSES THEIR LIFE FOR MY SAKE, WILL FIND IT.”* The Master Knight had rest. His quest was fulfilled.

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Once upon a time in Galilee, there lived a disciple of great renown. He was strong and brave and had no equal among the twelve. The Master Disciple was the Lord Jesus' champion and in all the land, there was none so grand as he.

One day the Lord Jesus challenged his disciples with a question: "WHO DO THE PEOPLE SAY THAT THE SON OF MAN IS?" And when they answered, he had yet another question. **"BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?"** All were vexed except the Master Disciple. Never once did he doubt. **"You are the Christ the Son of the Living God."** The Lord said to him, **". . . ON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH, AND THE POWERS OF DEATH SHALL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT."** Then the Lord Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and, on the third day, be raised.

The words of the Lord Jesus put fear into the Master Disciple's heart. The Messiah could not suffer . . . He must not suffer . . . He was the Chosen One, the Son of God. There seemed no purpose to his death. And if the Messiah should suffer, so might his disciples. In fear, the Master Disciple took his Lord aside and began to rebuke him: **"God forbid it Lord, this must never happen to you!"**

But the Lord Jesus said, "GET BEHIND ME, SATAN! YOU ARE A STUMBLING BLOCK TO ME; FOR YOU ARE NOT ON THE SIDE OF GOD, BUT OF HUMANS." The Master Disciple was troubled. He was strong, but his faith was weak Three times in Jerusalem he denied his Lord who loved him more than life itself.

The tale of the Master Disciple is too long to tell. His Lord was crucified, and, on the third day, he was resurrected by the power of God. Then, by Galilee's shore, the Lord Jesus asked, **"DO YOU LOVE ME?"** And three times, the Master Disciple answered, **"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."** Then the Lord said to him, **"FEED MY SHEEP. TRULY, TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG, YOU GIRDED YOURSELF AND WALKED WHERE YOU WOULD; BUT WHEN YOU ARE OLD, YOU WILL STRETCH OUT YOUR HANDS AND ANOTHER WILL GIRD YOU AND CARRY YOU WHERE YOU DO NOT WISH TO GO."** Then the Lord disappeared from sight.

When the Master Disciple was old and weary, he went to Rome to comfort the weary and give strength to the persecuted. Filthy rags covered their bodies and festered sores, their skin. Accursed by the powerful and shunned by the world, they cried out to the Master Disciple, **"Help us, kind sir, lest we perish."** But as he

cradled their heads in his hands, the soldiers took him from their midst to be crucified. Suddenly, in a blinding light, the Master Disciple saw the Lord Jesus once more and heard him speak, *“IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, LET THEM DENY THEMSELVES AND TAKE UP THEIR CROSSES AND FOLLOW ME. FOR WHOEVER WOULD SAVE THEIR LIFE WILL LOSE IT, AND WHOEVER LOSES THEIR LIFE FOR MY SAKE, WILL FIND IT.”* The Master Disciple had rest. That very day, the Stumbling Stone had become the Rock. His quest had been fulfilled.

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Once upon a time in Little Falls and Hillman, there lived a people who would be disciples of Jesus. They were faithful and strong and had no equal in zeal for worship. In all the land there were none who tried as hard as they. Then the Lord Jesus began to show them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and, on the third day, rise again. The words of the Lord Jesus put fear into the people's hearts. Their Messiah could not suffer because he was the Chosen One. If the Messiah should suffer, so might they. In fear, the people took their Lord aside and began to rebuke him: *“God forbid it Lord, this must never happen to you!”*

But the Lord Jesus said, “GET BEHIND ME, SATAN! YOU ARE A STUMBLING BLOCK TO ME; FOR YOU ARE NOT ON THE SIDE OF GOD, BUT OF HUMANS.” When the Lord finished speaking, they saw an aged beggar who lay on the road. Rags covered his body, and festered sores, his skin. Accursed by some because he was not one of their own, and shunned by others who had little compassion for weakness, the beggar lifted his hand and said, *“Help me, my friend, lest I perish.”* Then the Lord Jesus spoke *“IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, LET THEM DENY THEMSELVES, TAKE UP THEIR CROSSES AND FOLLOW ME.”*

Unlike the knight . . . Unlike the disciple . . . this story is not yet done, nor the decision made. This day, both the beggar and the Lord Jesus still wait for us. *“FOR WHOEVER WOULD SAVE THEIR LIFE WILL LOSE IT, AND WHOEVER LOSES THEIR LIFE FOR JESUS' SAKE, WILL FIND IT.”* Amen.