

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
30 August 2026

Matthew 16:21-28

Right after the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-10,) Jesus' ministry too off. We see him feeding the five thousand on a deserted place in Galilee; walking on the water on his way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee; healing all the sick in Gennesaret; healing a Canaanite woman's daughter in the district of Tiro and Sidon; and curing the lame, blind, maimed, mute, and many others in the Decapolis, on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where he also fed four-thousand people. Finally, we see him entering Caesarea Philippi, where Peter makes his famous confession (Matthew 16:13-20).

When we see this sequence of events, the episode we have today is a bit surprising. Right after the famous confession, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering ... and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Why talk about his suffering and death when things are going so well? Matthew gives us some clues to answer this question. Back when he was still in Gennesaret, after the episode of walking on water, Jesus was curing all sorts of sick people when the Pharisees and scribes challenged him, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." (15:2). Jesus calls these people "hypocrites" and proceeds to challenge the lack of connecting tissue between the law and how they choose to lead their lives. Then he reinterprets their teaching on dietary restrictions and eating with unwashed hands. "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles... but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile" (15:18-20).

Then at chapter 16:1-4, the Pharisees and Sadducees test Jesus, asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus calls them an evil and adulterous generation and says, "No sign will be given except the sign of Jonah." Right after, he warns the disciples about the yeast of these two groups, "beware of... the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (16:12). So, even during these chapters of great success in his mission, with frequent trips back and forth across the Sea of Galilee and great signs and wonders being performed, we witness echoes of danger and the beginning of controversy. Some of his enemies are gathering force. It is just a matter of time before these powerful groups arrest him and the prophecies about his passion in Jerusalem are fulfilled. Jerusalem is the final destination of his mission, and his human journey will end on a cross on a garbage hill outside of the city.

I have a great deal of empathy for Peter in this passage. Of course he is astonished and deeply disappointed by Jesus's announcement. One moment Jesus is accepting the proclamation that he is the Messiah and the next he is announcing his death. This is not how the prophets announced who the Messiah would be. This awaited liberator is expected to launch a glorious revolution against Rome; he is to lead the nation into political independence. The expectation is not for a humble Messiah willing to accept death, but for a military hero like King David or the Maccabee brothers in the second century before Christ.

Peter is appalled. He rebuked Jesus, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." "Literally, Peter could be offering a prayer, 'May God be merciful to you, Lord; this will not happen to you.' Being merciful would imply that God prevents bad things from happening... Peter presumes to know God's will. Jesus makes it clear that Peter is mistaken." ([Crossmarks.com](https://www.crossmarks.com/)).

But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus knows that Peter's rebuke was born out of love, yet sometimes we become stumbling blocks to others precisely out of love. Peter does not share Satan's demonic powers and willful disregard for God's law. Rather Peter is an obstacle to Jesus' mission. The "get behind me" is an invitation to follow Jesus, to realize that the Messiah must come first and the Church must follow behind. Jesus then explains what this following behind entails.

These are some of the most difficult mandates of Jesus to obey. He tells his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Three movements are required of the original disciples and of all disciples in all generations of the Church: a. Deny themselves, b. Take up their cross, c. Follow Jesus. The issue of denying ourselves simply means that we will not see ourselves as primary and the center of the universe, but rather, that we will do all in our power to lead lives oriented towards the love, respect, and service of others. The culture calls us to a never-ending pursuit of more: More things, more power, more money, and more respect, but the gospel calls us to have hearts inclined to others. This "denying ourselves" has nothing to do with self-humiliation, poor self-esteem, extreme asceticism, or exaggerated piety. The requirement is to a life filled with purpose and joy. A life directed toward God and others that leads to service and sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom.

b. According to commentators, the mandate to take up their cross in the original context points to a call to martyrdom. As their work of proclamation of the Gospel and God's Kingdom brings them face to face with the powers of the

empire, many of them will lose their lives. It is also a call to live and work among the marginalized, to identify with the powerless (slaves, foreigners, criminals, the sick, and the marginalized) for whom the world seems to have no use. Finally, “It is also to identify with those who resist the empire's control, who contest its version of reality, and who are vulnerable to its reprisals.” (Carter, Matthew on the Margins, 344). We must ask how this mandate to take up our cross needs to be interpreted in our own life and in the life of our Church. Our faith may not lead us to martyrdom, but perhaps it will force us to challenge political and economic systems that dehumanize the vulnerable, and perhaps this challenge can make us very unpopular in some circles, and even in our own homes.

c. To follow Jesus means to obey his teachings, but also to do the things Jesus did and commanded us to do. It is a call to proper faith in who Jesus is in his full identity and vocation. To live by, celebrate, proclaim, and be grateful for what God in Christ has done for humanity. This right faith includes actions like worship, prayer, scripture reading, fellowship, teaching, and learning. In a way, a proper faith requires that we sit at the foot of the Messiah like Mary and the Disciples did. But, to follow Jesus also requires proper action. To do the things Jesus did and the things he mandated us to do. It requires that we identify with and serve those who are persecuted and maligned for who they are and that we stand on the side of slaves, foreigners, the sick, and the marginalized. Finally, it requires that we stand on the side of those who are oppressed by all the empires of the world, and that we stand as witnesses against the evil of many human systems.

The passage ends with a warning. Many who seek to save their life through the accumulation of more, the exploitation of others, their allegiance to dehumanizing human powers, their apathy towards the needs of others, their desire for easy lives that care for no one else other than themselves... will end up losing their lives. On the other hand, those who dedicate their lives to the fulfilment of the kingdom imperatives of love and service will find their lives. When the Son of Man returns, he will repay what has been done in his name. Those in the first generation of the Church expected that return to happen very soon, whereas we now have a longer view of history. We know that the Kingdom of God has already started and will come to full completion when the Son of God returns to right all the wrongs of his creation. But we believe only God knows when this will happen.

The idea of reward, however, leaves us with a final thought: What we do on this earth is of utmost importance to God. A friend of mine used to say that God will ask each of us two questions at the end of days: “What did you do about my Son?” And “What did you do with what I gave you?” May we have the right answers when that day comes. Amen!