

My Cross to Bear

Meditation on Matthew 16:21-28

Sept. 3, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples 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. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' 23 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.' 24 Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27 'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

We were leaving for an anniversary party last Sunday after church, when I got a text from a man named Don that I met last June at a funeral reception. He was a long time friend of Gail Buchanan. He invited me to

go on a gator hunt. I had expressed interest while he was showing me photos of Gail posing next to huge reptiles dragged from Florida swamps. I didn't know this side of Gail, though certainly she was a risk taker as a devoted Christian. You have to be, if you want to follow Jesus!

Gail's multi-faceted ministry included raising 3 children and nurturing them in the faith with her husband, Jimmy, and then continuing on as a single parent after he died of cancer at the age of 39. She loved this church! She labored on fellowship committee, served as a deacon, taught parenting classes, and gathered with a circle of friends every Monday night for prayer and spiritual encouragement for more than 3 decades. Belonging to Jesus meant worshiping with her sisters and brothers in the Lord on Sunday and taking the gospel to the community and world with acts of kindness, love and generosity. She served on the Board of the Sharing Center, as a member of the Junior League of Central and North Brevard, and President of the Friends of the Library. Being a Christian meant serving her country in the U.S. Navy, earning the rank of captain, and coordinating medical services during Desert Storm. These skills and experiences, along with her training in Occupational Therapy and Clinical Psychology, helped equip her for medical mission work in Haiti and Nicaragua.

Her greatest passion was for helping needy children and families. She was instrumental in the founding of an early intervention program, the "Lab School" at Brevard Community College, now Eastern Florida State. She fostered self-esteem, teaching children and parents "the great joy of being God's special creation."

Everything she did was all about sharing Jesus and helping others,

using her gifts and talents to build up the Kingdom and redeem lost souls. At the reception, Don told me he respected Gail's religion as a part of who she was-- an important part--without embracing her religious beliefs. I know this saddened Gail--that her close friend didn't have a relationship with the Lord. She wanted him to have what she had!

Reading his text, I felt that Gail must be smiling down at me from heaven--still reaching out to him, prompting him to draw ever nearer to the Lord. I didn't tell Jim right away about the text from this man I hardly knew and Jim didn't know at all. I could just imagine his response when I asked him if I could go on a gator hunt--for Jesus' sake. And you have to know this about me. I have never been on any kind of hunting trip before--and never wanted to. The thought of being that close to alligators in a mosquito-infested swamp fills me with dread.

"Is this God's will for me?" I wondered, definitely feeling out of my comfort zone. And yet, wanting to please the Lord, knowing that it isn't easy or always "safe" to follow Jesus.

I decided to wait and talk to Jim about it on the ride home.

Jesus urges the disciples to take up their crosses and follow him in our reading in Matthew 16 today. The invitation comes after he rebukes Peter for not understanding what Peter himself has just declared in verse 16--that Jesus is the "Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Peter, in Matthew, is the first to call Jesus, "Messiah" --in Greek, *ho Christos (the Christ.)* After Peter declares Jesus' true identity, the narrative shifts; the

shadow of the cross falls upon them, though the ministry of teaching, preaching, loving and healing continues. Matthew says in 16:21, “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples 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.”

This is the first of 3 times in Matthew that Jesus will attempt to teach his disciples about the cross that is his destiny. They won’t understand what it means to be the Messiah, of which the Old Testament spoke, until after his resurrection. They don’t recognize that Jesus is the suffering servant of Isaiah 52 and 53 and Psalms 69 and 22, who will say on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is no triumphal earthly king or warrior that the disciples will defend or protect, the one who will put down Israel’s enemies, as Peter may believe. He infers this with his rebuke to Jesus when he speaks of his suffering death to come, “God forbid it, Lord. This shall *never* happen to you.” This word, “never” expresses Peter’s sentiment that to have the Messiah suffer and die is *unthinkable*. As Paul says in I Cor. 1:23, the message of Christ crucified is “foolishness to Greeks” (or Gentiles) and a “stumbling block to Jews,” including Peter, who loved him.

Jesus says to Peter now, “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.”

His rebuke is especially painful because he has just promised that he will use Peter--his nickname for him that means “rock”--to be the “rock” on which he will build his church. Jesus uses similar language in chapter

4 when he rebukes the devil in the wilderness for tempting him to use his special relationship with God for his own gain.

That it is God's will for His Son to suffer and die is probably more confusing to Peter because Jesus' ministry is about alleviating suffering; he's healing the sick, binding up broken hearts, feeding the hungry, casting out demons and lifting up the poor. And the idea of anyone being raised from the dead, well, it seems pretty farfetched to the disciples. But God's own suffering through His Son, the Christ, **is** God's plan for the redemption of the world. It is divinely necessary, as Jesus says in verse 21. He "must" go to Jerusalem, and suffer and die, and on the third day, be raised.

But what is all this about losing our lives, for Christ's sake, so that we may find them? This is a difficult concept to grasp--and it was hard for the disciples, too. For human beings naturally do things out of self-preservation. We seek to avoid difficult and dangerous things; we don't want to get hurt or feel pain--emotionally or physically.

Only the Spirit helps us see things differently, and we learn to trust that God has something better for us than living simply for ourselves, being safe and comfortable. What's challenging is to give up our own expectations that life must be for us a certain way, or else we may miss the blessings that come with total reliance on God. These blessings the Spirit offers us each day include faith and hope, love and joy, patience and a peace that surpasses human understanding. Our blessings are meant to be shared. As Jesus sends out his disciples in Matthew 10:8, he says, "Freely you have received; freely give." It's in the giving of who we are in Jesus Christ that we experience abundant life!

I did talk to Jim about gator hunting on the way home from the anniversary party on Sunday. He took it surprisingly well. He told me calmly that he would rather I didn't go. Not because he was worried about the gators, really. He was more concerned about me being alone in the wilderness with strange men. But he left it up to me.

I have a feeling that I won't be gator hunting this week. I'm pretty busy with ministry at MIPC. The storms heading this way may make the decision for us. If I do go, it will be to reach out with kindness to Gail's friends and family, who are still mourning their loss. And to share Christ's comfort and a peace that surpasses human understanding. But it won't be because I feel that gator hunting is "my cross to bear."

People use that phrase sometimes when they have to endure something disappointing, unpleasant, or even tragic. But that's a misunderstanding of this passage. God may give us trials-- not as a cross to bear, but to build godly character. As Paul says in Romans 5:3-5, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Jesus never asks us to carry his cross or force us to take another's. He doesn't expect us seek hardship or suffering, for hardship or suffering's sake. Our loving Savior doesn't desire us to be miserable! He beckons us to deny ourselves and resist the temptation to live a "safe" and comfortable life, not allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to others. He invites us to pick up our own crosses and let go

of worldly ambitions, fears, self-absorption and self-protection--and live a courageous, self-giving, deeply satisfying life. He desires that we follow in his footsteps--in his loving ways, which is much more rewarding than, say, hunting alligators!

How we will answer Christ's call as a church? Will we be courageous? Generous? Compassionate? Loving? Will you choose the way to abundant life? Do you hear Christ's voice beckoning to you now?

"Take up your cross and follow me."

Let us pray.

Holy One, we thank you for taking up your cross and being willing to suffer and die when we were perishing in our sins! Thank you for the hope of your resurrection-- that we, too, will be raised to live eternally with you. Thank you for the promise of abundant life in this world as we seek to follow you and deny ourselves, resisting the temptation to choose only a safe and comfortable life, rather than taking risks, living dangerously, and being vulnerable for your sake. Help us, Lord, to be more loving, giving, compassionate, and generous. Use us to build your Church, reaching out to lost souls with your love, mercy and grace. In Christ we pray. Amen.