

13th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
August 30, 2020

Text: Matthew 16:21-28
Theme: The Cross We Carry

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

Last Sunday I talked about the importance of verbalizing or putting to print our stories for future generations. From the lesson in Isaiah we learned that not only do we need to share the details of our lives but we need to share our faith and our relationship with God. It warmed my heart to receive some emails this past week from people who were encouraged to start writing their own letters. Such an exercise offers those closest to us a sense of comfort and hope. Whatever we face, we face with God at our side. We are not alone.

Let me begin this morning with another story of faith. It is about a man named Bart. His written story focused on the relationship he had with his father which started out well enough until his father was hit by a car at a construction site. His injuries led to permanent brain damage and Bart described his father as never being the same after the accident. Eventually his parents divorced, and Bart was left to live with his father and older brother. Bart became the target of both verbal and physical abuse.

While in ninth grade, his father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Knowing that it was terminal resulted in another dramatic change in the attitude and behavior of his father. Faced with his own mortality the father became more like the man that existed before the accident. The abuse stopped and he embraced the faith that he had outwardly professed. Bart then went on to describe a relationship and friendship with his father that grew stronger and deeper with each passing day. When his father died Bart talked about how God had been the one to restore the relationship that had been so frail and volatile.

His story of faith is not just written down in letter form. Bart turned it into a song that we hear all the time on Christian radio stations and in our own worship space.

For those attending the second service you will hear our cantors sing it today. It is entitled *I Can Only Imagine*. It is a powerful song (and story) of deep faith and encouragement.

In the opening lyrics we hear these words that are addressed to Jesus: I can only imagine what I will be like when I walk by your side. I can only imagine what my eyes will see when your face is before me. I can only imagine . . .

Keep those words before you as we enter the gospel lesson for today. Last Sunday Jesus asked his disciples two questions. *Who do people say that I am?* And then – *Who do you say that I am?* And with excitement in his voice Peter answered that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. And Jesus told Peter that he was right. He went on to say that on this rock (on the faith of Peter) Jesus would build his church.

Peter must have been on this incredible high! He already knew what it was like to be in the presence of Jesus. For almost three years he was observing every move that Jesus took and was learning so much from him. His imagination must have gone wild picturing what the future would hold for him as he took on such an important role.

And then (as we like to say) the other shoe dropped. From that time on Jesus started to show his disciples what would happen to him when they arrived in Jerusalem. Jesus made his future so painfully clear that Peter (who was so bold in his proclamation just a short time ago) was beside himself. He needed to speak to Jesus right away and in private. He had a responsibility to prevent Jesus from doing anything that would destroy their common mission. Surely Jesus was just having a bad day.

In the Greek we hear that Peter rebuked Jesus just as Jesus rebuked the wind and sea and rebuked the demons. It is the same Greek word in all three places. But now Peter is the one who has taken charge of the situation and repudiates (in the strongest sense of the word) what Jesus just said. And with his words Peter crossed a line. Disciples were expected to follow their rabbi. His words were understandable but disrespectful. No matter his motives, Peter went too far.

In essence Peter placed himself in opposition to God. Oh Peter!

He moved quickly from being a rock of faith to a rock that caused others to stumble. Even though Jesus gave Peter the highest praise, Peter still had much to learn about being a follower of Christ. But he just could not wrap his head around why Jesus had to go through so much suffering and be killed. In his mind the Messiah had to be a warrior like David, one who would drive out the Romans and free the Israelites.

By human standards it was a reasonable assumption. The Romans mistreated the people and used violence against them. Let an even stronger force come to drive them out.

It may be reasonable to think this way but by now we should know better. When we let violence breed more violence it gets us nowhere. When we let our hatred fester then nothing changes except for the fact that we get stuck in our own quicksand. Jesus knew this. He knew he had to shift the thinking of those who wanted to be his followers. We must shift our thinking. We cannot keep doing things the way they were because history tells us that it leads us to the same ending! Instead Jesus tells us not to dwell on earthly things but on the things from above.

All the way back in Matthew 5 Jesus taught that *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* was not what we are to do to one another. Instead he modeled for us (all the way to the cross) that the better way was to lead with love and forgiveness and mercy rather than with retribution and violence and hatred. At this moment Peter could not imagine Jesus being killed. It is the last thing he heard even though Jesus went on to say that on the third day he would be raised. Peter could not get beyond the suffering even though Jesus promised that it would lead to his resurrection. And it is his resurrection that changed everything. It is the empty tomb that reinforces that sacrifice and love are ultimately what will prevail.

We hear in this gospel lesson that to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, and to lose our lives is something that the world does not want. The world entices us to keep doing the same thing over and over again even though it is not life-giving. Fight back! Retaliate! Hate! What kind of song would Bart have written if he had stayed in that kind of world?

Instead he invited us to imagine a life with Christ. Imagine giving someone another chance instead of writing them off, forgiving someone who has wronged you instead of seeking retribution, being open-handed and generous with the resources we have been blessed to receive instead of holding onto whatever we can. Deny ourselves and put our future into the hands of God. Take up our cross and anticipate with joy being raised to new life. Lose our lives and taste the life that we never thought was possible.

That is what I hear when I listen to this song – *I Can Only Imagine*. Our stories of faith (our songs) bear witness to how life with Christ can change our relationships that once were fragile and volatile. Only God in Christ has that kind of power. Amen