

Lectionary Readings: Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Sermon Title: *The Paradox of the Cross*

Prayer: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of [our] heart[s] be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, [our] Rock and [our] Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

Salutation: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:2)

Text: The Word from God through which the Holy Spirit comes to stir our hearts for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost is from our Gospel Reading: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 16th chapter.

Introduction: Dear friends in Christ, Christian teaching is full of paradox. What do I mean by that? We think of a paradox as a contradiction, an oxymoron, or an impossibility. Take for example:

- God is three, yet He is one.
- Jesus is human, yet divine.
- This is bread and wine, but also Christ's body and blood.
- And you, Christian:
 - Are sinner yet also saint.
 - Wicked and righteous.
 - Dead in sin, yet alive in Christ.

I. Today Jesus says: *“Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever would lose his life for My sake will find it”* (v 25). So, what do we make of what Jesus says? Friends these sorts of mysterious sayings can only be rightly understood through the cross.

Last week, we hear Peter's great confession, his bright shining moment. He declares: *“You are the Christ!”* (Matthew 16:16). And Jesus blesses him for it. He's on top of the mountain, spiritually speaking

It all comes together with this wonderful insight, given by the Father. Everyone's been asking and wondering who Jesus is, and Peter, just a regular guy, a fisherman, is given the answer from heaven above. Wow! What a glorious moment.

And then it all comes crashing down. Because with what seems like the very next breath Jesus is calling Peter the devil in these words: *“Get behind Me, Satan! For you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of man!”* (v 23).

So, what do we make of those words from Jesus? Friends, have you had this sort of experience in life?

- You think everything is fine.
- You've got it all figured out:
- Life is running on all cylinders.
- Your health is good, the job pays well, your marriage is solid, and your kids behave themselves.
- You go to church, you pray, you give your offering.

Maybe it goes so well that you even take all this for granted. But God blesses you, smiles on you, and life is good. And then, ka-blammy. It all comes crashing down:

- Maybe it's you that messes up.
- Maybe it's some senseless tragedy that strikes out of the blue.
- Your wife leaves you.
- Your son gets a girl pregnant.
- You get laid off.
- The doctor says: "*Cancer.*"

And now the God Who you thought was your friend, Who has lifted up His countenance upon you – seems to be giving anything but peace. Instead He seems like your enemy. You think: "*God must hate me.*" So, how do we make sense of this? Well, again, only through the cross.

II. For Peter, it wasn't enough to know that Jesus was the Christ. Peter and the other disciple had all been wondering. But with Peter's great confession hanging in the air, Jesus tells him just what kind of Christ He means to be.

Therefore, in the words of our text, we see that Jesus is explaining to His disciples what is His ultimate mission here on earth: "*[He] began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*" (v 21).

Now, that is NOT what Peter and the disciples wanted to hear. That's not the kind of Christ they were looking for. They wanted a Jesus without the cross. You see:

- They liked all the glorious miracles and crowds following Jesus.
- They marveled that even the demons submitted to them in Jesus' name.

Surely, they had plans for what lay ahead:

- Like James and John who wanted thrones on Jesus' left and right in this Kingdom He was preaching about.
- Peter, too, probably had his own plans laid out for the future – plans which must have given him a cushy job and high honors.

Yes, they probably thought Jesus would come into His glory, restore the kingdom to Israel, make everything hunky dory once again on earth. Oh, yeah, victory, triumph, glory, finally, was within their grasp. With the Christ here on our side, nothing can go wrong. So, they must have thought.

But that all came crashing down. Peter couldn't bask in the glory of his confession for long. Jesus must be talking crazy talk about suffering, betrayal and death! And when he tried to quietly set Jesus straight, Jesus loudly and clearly calls him out: "*Get behind me Satan.*"

You see, a Christ without the cross is a satanic version of Christ. And it is a Christ that is all too common, even among "*Christians.*" Such as:

- A Christ of victory apart from defeat, rather than He who defeats death by His death.
- A Christ of glory apart from humiliation, and not the One Whose power is made perfect in weakness.
- A Jesus who smiles and laughs but never sheds bloody tears, or drinks a cup of wrath, or cries out in forsakenness.
- A Jesus Who you'd never know suffered and died for sins, because, well, let's not talk about sin it's too much of a downer.

If this is your kind of Jesus, I challenge you today to repent, and see Jesus only through the cross. You see, if your Jesus is only smiles and sunshine, then you better get Satan behind you and see Christ as He is – crucified for us sinners.

For this is:

- The only Christ that matters.
- The only Christ He wants to be.
- The only Christ Who can save us from sin and death and the devil.

For you and I need a Jesus who knocks us off our high-horse of self-righteousness and says: "*I will be your righteousness, and I alone.*"

And it is this Christ that we must see in the crosses of our life. For anything a Christian takes up in life, for the sake of Christ, is our cross – sometimes heavy, sometimes a bit lighter. But always our cross is following Him Who has gone before us, submitting to his Father's will in all things.

III. No, we don't get to choose our own crosses. Nor do we even always know what they are. But only Christ of the cross is comfort for us in all the twists and turns, ups and downs, crosses large and small of this life.

Therefore, it is a paradox, isn't it, that when we rest secure – Christ shakes us and cuts us down with His word of rebuking Law. And when we are stumbling, fallen, hurting – this is when the Gospel brings hope. We need both. We make the good confession, like Peter. For it is also given to us to say: *“You are the Christ”!*

But we also need that rebuke. Yes, that our sinful selves would get behind the child of God, drown under the daily repentance of baptismal renewal, and go the way of Satan. That is resigned to the irrelevant past.

And this renewal:

- Gives us cause once again to confess Christ and rejoice in His victory.
- It gives us the faith and strength to carry our daily crosses knowing that His cross is ever before us.

Therefore, Christ’s suffering gives our suffering meaning. And His resurrection gives us hope.

Conclusion: Dear friends in Christ, whatever cross you bear this day, know that Christ bore His before you. So, take up that cross and follow Him – for His cross, His suffering, His death – have already won the victory.

So that even in your troubles and sorrows, your faith would look to Him – and lay down your life only to find it. That in the Christ of the cross, your soul is not forfeited – but saved – by the one who gave His life for the world. Even Jesus Christ.

In the name of ✠ Jesus, Who forgives all your sins. Amen.

To God alone the Glory!