

Pentecost 3, 6.21.2020

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Jeremiah 20:7–13; Psalm 69; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

“The Difference”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Today, Jesus makes it clear that his disciples will experience division in this world. Jesus tells his disciples plainly that if they remember him before others, Jesus will remember them before the Father in heaven. Jesus is telling them that he will be “the difference” in their lives.

When I was in high school, I was often the guest in a friend’s home. We ran track and cross-country together. My friend’s family was large, and the boys’ rooms were all on the third floor. At the top of the stairs on the third floor, there was a framed painting of Jesus with a handwritten note attached to it. The note read simply, “The Difference.” I had gone by this painting many times, and one day, I finally asked my friend about the note attached to the painting. My friend replied, “Oh, that’s my father.” I think my friend’s father was seeking to impress upon his sons was that Jesus is “the difference” who gives direction, grace, and courage to our lives. I have never forgotten the wisdom contained in that note. Jesus is “the difference.”

Today through this story of my friend’s father, I want to remember the role of fathers in our lives, and remember my friend’s dad, whose handwritten note still makes an impression on one of his son’s friends. God bless all fathers and father figures as they seek to model the grace of Jesus to their children, their children’s friends, and to all young people.

Jesus is “the difference.” Jesus talks about this difference in today’s gospel. Jesus is the difference between life and death, between being acknowledged before the Father and being denied before the Father. Jesus drives out fear, so that we can live fearlessly for others. Jesus and his cross are the difference that will help us find our lives by losing them in service for others.

Today’s gospel is one we need to hear over and over, because Jesus speaks of discipleship in a way should cause us to sit up and listen. Jesus tells his disciples, “*One’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.*” These are hard words on a day like Father’s Day, but Jesus’ words should make us pause and think, “What relationship in my life is the most important?”

Jesus spoke of his relationship to us, saying, “*Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake*

*will find it.*” Jesus is the only one in the world who will invite us to carry the cross. The cross is “the sword” that Jesus speaks of in today’s gospel. The cross is what has the potential to bring division between even family members. This may be hard for some of us to understand in a culture in which being a disciple of Jesus is often praised, and doesn’t often seem to require much sacrifice. When I served as a missionary in an overwhelmingly Buddhist world, I had church members who were the only Christians in their families. They shared with me their experiences of family strife and division over following Jesus. Jesus had become “the difference” in their lives, and by placing Jesus first they experienced division among family. To say it another way, who will set the moral compass of your life - family, nation, politics, social agendas, or Jesus and his cross?

Jesus is the difference. When I think about my friend’s father and that painting of Jesus, I think my friend’s dad also wanted his children to know that in the hardball struggles of life, Jesus and his cross can become our moral compass. You see, like a compass, the cross of Jesus always points in a certain direction. The cross always points in the direction that Jesus travels. Jesus will be wherever there is suffering, wherever there is injustice, wherever there is sin and separation, wherever there is need for healing and forgiveness. The cross points us in the direction that Jesus walks. We must walk with Jesus because we, too, need forgiveness for our own sin. We each carry sin, and only in carrying the cross for others do we find forgiveness, release, and hope.

Jesus uses the word “fear” three times in today’s gospel. Jesus knows his followers will come face to face with fear. What makes people afraid? What makes people hesitate or remain silent in the face of injustice? Fear. Jesus knows his disciples will struggle with fear. So Jesus tells his disciples three times, “have no fear.” Jesus says *“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”*

The powers, systems, and structures of the world have the brutal power to kill the body. This is what makes them powerful. Jesus tells his disciples they must not fear the one who can kill the body; the disciples must overcome their fear of the world with the fear of God. Jesus tells this to his disciples, and us, because we are to remain vigilant to the direction Jesus walks. Jesus’ cross always points us toward the world and it’s suffering. Jesus takes us where no other leader will ever take us.

Jesus and his cross take us to those who suffer – to where people continue to be harassed, jailed, and oppressed for their race, orientation, nation of origin, and conscience. Jesus’ followers will also face arrest and threats of death when they seek to have compassion for those who are oppressed.

The history of the church is filled with stories of martyrs who were killed for following Jesus and his cross. Like them, we are called to risk everything by losing our lives for Jesus sake, so that we might find our lives at Jesus' cross, standing with those who suffer the sin of injustice.

I will not beat around the bush; Christians need to remember that Jesus was killed because of the politics of his kingdom. What did Jesus do that was so wrong? Jesus welcomed the sinner, went to the outcast, healed the sick, and liberated the possessed. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of heaven. Because of this Jesus was viewed as a threat by the religious and political establishment. The Letter to the Hebrews (13:12) reminds us that Jesus suffered "*outside the gate.*" "*Outside the gate*" means Jesus suffered the division his cross brings; he was falsely accused, stripped of his human dignity, dehumanized, criminalized, beaten, and killed. "Outside the gate" means that Jesus lost his rights as a citizen and human being in his world.

Jesus' cross is a symbol of unjust suffering, and for this reason, the cross continues to give hope to millions of people who also suffer unjustly. Those who suffer the dehumanizing power of the systemic and structural sin of the world look to Jesus, because Jesus knows their pain and Jesus will struggle with them.

The Letter to the Hebrews continues, "*Therefore, let us go forth to him outside the gate and bear the abuse he endured.*" Jesus is "the difference" because Jesus and his cross point us to the suffering of others "outside the gate." As Christians, we must go where Jesus goes - "outside the gate." Jesus' cross is the moral compass of God's kingdom of heaven. When Jesus says "*whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father in heaven,*" he is talking about people who turn a blind eye to the suffering of the world at the foot of Jesus' cross. When Jesus says, "*Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*" Jesus is being quite blunt that the only way to the Father and the kingdom is through himself and his cross. Jesus is indeed "the way, the truth and the life." Jesus and his cross is "the difference" that will place every follower of Jesus at odds with the *status quo* of families, the world, and its systems and structures. Jesus' kingdom is real and Christians are called to point to it "outside the gate."

Jesus tells his disciples that the only way to see him in his glory is through the cross and it's suffering. Jesus' words to "take up the cross" are words of grace. Grace is not some private treasure that we put in a safety deposit box. Like the Pharisee in the story of the Good Samaritan, we don't think, "I'm saved, 'hallelujah!'" and then walk on, ignoring the person beaten on the side of the

road. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Let us remember, the arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Jesus and his cross travel along the arch of justice. We should not be surprised at this for, in and through the Word, everything was created. God’s justice is embedded in creation, because the living Word of God always brings justice and love into being.

Perhaps you noticed in today’s gospel Jesus says, “*even the hairs of your head are all counted.*” Jesus didn’t say anything about the color of that hair. Black, brown, red, blond, grey, white, or balding,” Jesus watches over us all. The moral arch of God’s kingdom always bends in the direction of justice for the weak and suffering. The grace of Jesus and his cross liberate us from the sin in our hearts and in the structures of the world, so that freed, we might fearlessly embody Jesus’ voice in the world. We are each called to travel with Jesus to those who are treated unjustly, no matter the color of the hairs on their heads or the color of their skin.

To acknowledge Jesus before others means standing up against the sinful bullies of the world, and standing with those who are discriminated against for the color of their skin, their gender, their orientation, their nation of origin, their conscience. This is where Jesus will be, and if we don’t want to go to those in need, Jesus tells us very plainly that he will say, “I don’t know you, because you didn’t know me.”

When Paul reminds us today “*we have been buried with Jesus by baptism into death, so that...we too might walk in newness of life,*” Paul is telling us about grace. Paul is telling us that whoever has died with Christ has also been freed from sin. If we are “*dead to sin and alive in Christ,*” we are freed from fear of everything that can harm us. We are liberated to live for others. I am convinced that the only way for true change to come to our world and its sinful systems and structures is to confront the sin that continues to haunt our hearts and our world. Only Jesus is “the difference.” Only Jesus can forgive our sin and lead us “outside the gate” to those who suffer.

Today, Jesus asks us again, “Will you come with me and carry the cross?” Will you die to yourself and live with me again today? Will you become messengers for my sake in a world of suffering and injustice? Will you become “the difference” in the lives of your neighbors? Amen.