

Pentecost 16, 9.12.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-9; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

“The Way of the Cross”

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

Where were you on September 11, 2001? Most people old enough to remember can probably tell you where they were. Mari and I were in Tokyo getting ready to fly back to the United States on the following day, September 12th. I had spent the summer doing field research for my dissertation in Japanese university libraries and archives, and at the Japanese National Diet Library and National Archives.

Japan is 13 hours ahead of the US Eastern Time Zone, and on the evening of September 11 Mari and I were sitting around the table saying goodbyes at her parents' home in Tokyo. Just before 10 pm Tokyo time, the phone rang, and Mari's aunt told us to turn on the news. Moments later we saw the South Tower of the World Trade Center hit by United Airlines Flight 175. Very soon afterwards my mother called from North Carolina saying, “Are you watching the news, something is happening in New York City;” and she added, “Don't get on your flight tomorrow.” Needless to say, all flights were cancelled. We needed to have luggage returned from Narita International Airport, train tickets refunded, and reschedule our return flight to the US. We flew out of Narita on September 17th, arriving at O'Hare on the 18th. The flight was less than half full and there were two armed US air marshals on the plane.

Yesterday, the United States, with moments of silence, remembered the four planes and their passengers, the victims in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as fire fighters, police officers, and first responders who lost their lives twenty years ago in that tragedy. During the 9/11 attacks 2,977 people were killed, of which 372 persons were non-U.S. citizens from more than 90 nations who worked in the World Trade Center. Of the 2,977 victims, 412 were emergency medical personnel and members of the New York Fire and Police Departments. There is no way to summarize the enormity of the loss of life on that day as well as the later deaths due to injury and the breathing of toxic air. Many still suffer ongoing health challenges, physical and psychological.

The September 11 attacks changed our world and we are still feeling their effects. Twenty years of war, vastly changed airport and airline security, as well as fear and suspicion of ethnic and religious difference have deeply scarred us as human beings. 9/11 was an attack upon the United States and the economic and political freedom of all nations that were represented in the World Trade Center as well as those at the Pentagon. Yet perhaps most profoundly, it was and continues to be a haunting attack upon our common humanity in a global world. We forget, that though this

attack happened on US soil by targeting US buildings with enormous symbolic power, the attacks were also centered upon the shared human global interests of economic, political, and cultural exchange between nations. The resulting twenty years from 2001 to 2021 have undermined global collaboration and partnership replacing them with deep suspicion of difference both domestically and internationally.

Sixteen of my twenty-eight years of international mission service were lived during this period. I was not unaware that my role as a missionary, pastor, and seminary professor was also to be a bridge builder between not just two nations, but between the people of many nations that I came into contact with internationally. I believe that the tragic events of 9/11 have, over the past twenty years, had a dehumanizing tendency, causing us to become suspicious of both friend and stranger. As a Christian, I also believe that this dehumanization can be overcome by walking in the same direction as Jesus on “the way of the cross.”

In this morning’s gospel, after asking his disciples what others were saying about him, Jesus asked his disciples, “*But who do you say that I am?*” The answer to this question shapes our mission as a church as well as shaping each of us as human beings. We all know Peter’s textbook answer to that question: “*You are the Messiah.*” Yet Peter soon stumbled as Jesus explained who and what the Messiah is and does. Jesus began to teach his disciples, “*the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*”

Jesus “*said all this quite openly*” so there could be no misunderstanding that he would suffer, be rejected, killed and then raised after three days. Jesus described the messianic event of the cross and resurrection as self-sacrificial for others and a way upon which we are also invited to walk. The reading from Isaiah today echoes Jesus’ words about God’s Suffering Servant: “*I gave my back to those who struck me...I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced.*”

Though Peter knew the words of Isaiah, he did not ask Jesus to elaborate; he did not ask his teacher for further explanation, rather he immediately began to rebuke Jesus. Jesus again spoke quite openly to Peter, “*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*” In no uncertain terms, Jesus told the disciples that his path as the Messiah was not a humanly imagined path. It was not a path of human glory or human power. The path that Jesus walks, and invites us to join him on, is the divine way of self-denial and service to others. This path is also the only way that we are able to follow Jesus and participate in the messianic event.

Like a good teacher responding to the questions of students, Jesus further explained what his identity as the Messiah means. He said to the crowd and his disciples, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

These are not easy words, but they are words of grace. Yet time and time again, humanity rebels against these words of grace, forgiveness and freedom. We think we know better than Jesus. We stumble because we don’t follow directions easily. We do not want to deny ourselves anything, and we balk at carrying the cross.

Jesus words, *“Let them deny themselves,”* literally mean “to abandon or discard” that self that gets in the way of following Jesus. We live in a world that tells us we don’t need to deny ourselves anything. “Have it your way” as the old fast food jingle went, or as the well-known song of American individuality goes, “Let the record show, I took all the blows; I did it my way.” The trouble is we want our own way and not Jesus’ way of the cross. Peter made that clear enough. Yet Jesus invites us to reimagine what it means to be human by discarding that false sense of self that our world tells us we need. The world tells us to choose sides, to love some and hate others. The world tells us to freely serve ourselves rather than freely serving others.

Jesus continued saying that anyone who would follow him must *“take up their cross.”* In these four words, *“take up their cross,”* Jesus is inviting us to take up a burden or a work that God has laid upon each of us to do in our lifetimes. Each of us has been given work to do as human beings. Listen to the words of Isaiah again, *“The Lord has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn away.”* What cross has Jesus laid upon you? What work has God given you to do during your human journey? How is Jesus seeking to use your talents and abilities, your hands and voices?

Jesus continued, *“And follow me.”* There are no greater words of grace than these: *“Follow me.”* These words are grace because Jesus promises to lead, walk and work with us as we carry the cross, doing the work we have been given to do.

The texts for today do not sugarcoat anything. The reading from James lays bare our human hypocrisy, writing, *“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not be so.”* If we follow Jesus, our lives will become a blessing to others rather than a curse. Follow Jesus, and stay close to him. He alone will liberate you from sin and death, freeing your hands and voices to become blessings rather than curses.

Today, September 12th, is “God’s Work, Our Hands” Sunday – a day on which ELCA churches remember that we are blessed to follow Jesus in service and sacrifice for others. Today after worship I invite you to take a moment to write two or three notes of blessing and encouragement to

pupils and teachers at Merry Oaks International Academy, a school in which children from disadvantaged backgrounds need encouragement in an uncertain and anxious world.

Today seems perhaps like any other day, yet it is also the first day after twenty years under the shadow of global terror, war and human strife, domestic division and startling selfishness. Today is also Sunday, the day of the resurrection. The question before us is the one Jesus asks, “*But who do you say that I am?*” We have seen the world rent asunder by going our own way rather than the way that Jesus walks. Jesus’ question “*But who do you say that I am?*” requires an answer from each of us for the next twenty years. Will they be years of healing, rebuilding and hope? Or will they be more years of rancor and human selfishness? Will we learn from Jesus to care for one another rather than fighting amongst ourselves? Jesus is always inviting us to walk in the direction that he walks. The way of the cross is the path of freedom from sin, self-discovery, and lifetime service as a blessing to others.

Though the events of twenty years ago have haunted our world, our nation and our human identity, life continues to throw problems at us: we live today haunted by the demons of a pandemic and its attendant problems. Though 9/11 was a tremendous tragedy with nearly 3,000 people killed, we continue to see, on average every 2-3 days, the same number of deaths in this nation alone due to Covid-19. Over a period of 18 months, 4.6 million people have died worldwide, and 677,000 people have died in this nation. These numbers are so large that they are hard to grasp.

Haunted by war, division and death, Jesus’ question presses in upon us: “*But who do you say that I am?*” It is a question that quickly counters all of our evasive “Yes, but” answers. Wherever we are, and on whichever side of the political and cultural divide we may stand, Jesus says, “*Follow me.*”

In this midst of great human suffering, some thrust upon us, and some self-inflicted, Jesus comes to us again today inviting us to walk a different path. It is not a path that the world will ever invite us to walk. Only the Messiah comes saying, “*deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.*”

Like a good teacher, Jesus said to the crowd and his disciples, “*For what can a person give in return for their life?*” These words of Jesus’ haunt our world. What will you give for the gift of your life? Jesus does not want a token gift; Jesus wants our hearts and our lives.

Each of our lives is a gift. When God gives a gift, it is given with a purpose. “*For what can a person give in return for their life?*” What will you render to the Lord for all of his benefits to you?

Walk in the direction of Jesus and his cross. Use your hands and voices to do God’s work in this world. Amen.