

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost; July 17, 2022

+ Luke 9:18-24 +

“Jesus is the Christ and the Cross”

One time when Jesus was praying alone and the disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”

They answered, “‘John the Baptist,’ but others say ‘Elijah,’ and others say, ‘one of the ancient prophets come back to life.’”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.”

He gave them a strict command not to tell this to anyone. He said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and experts of the law. He must be killed and be raised on the third day.”

Jesus said to them all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

The crowds get the answer wrong.

Jesus breaks from his private prayer to ask his disciples, **“Who do the crowds say that I am?”** The answers all come up short. The crowds recognize that there is something different, something special about Jesus. So he could be a great prophet who has come back. Maybe John the Baptist, recently executed. Maybe Elijah, who long ago was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Or maybe one of the other prophets. Special, sure.

Today the crowds still get the answer wrong. Some crowds are still willing to concede that Jesus is special. A great teacher. A wise philosopher. A man who promotes peace and love. Special, sure. Other crowds no longer concede even that much. Jesus is divisive. He is a trouble maker. He is a madman. Or, he does not exist and never did. He is a figment of the imagination.

Back then, the crowds conceded that Jesus is special. Today some crowds still do, while others have turned on him entirely. But he’s more than important and special. He’s more than a prophet. Believers, like Jesus’ disciples, know this. To his disciples, his followers, Jesus addresses this questions: **“But who do you say that I am?”**

“But...you...” Jesus’ followers will answer the question differently than the crowds. The crowds see with their eyes a man who looks like any other. The prophet Isaiah says there is nothing about his appearance that impresses, nothing in the way he looks that grabs our attention. But Jesus followers see with more than their eyes. They see with faith.

It is Peter’s faith that speaks: **“The Christ of God.”** When Jesus was born on Christmas night, the angels called him Christ. Five chapters earlier in Luke’s Gospel, the demons identified him as Christ. But this is the first time we hear a human speak Jesus’ true identity: The Christ of God.

The Christ is the Messiah, the one the Lord promised throughout the centuries of the Old Testament would come and save his people. Jesus is not just important. He's not just special. He's the promised Savior. And he is God. Not just "Christ," Peter says. **"The Christ of God."** God in the flesh, who has come to save.

When we look at Jesus through the eyes of faith, and we certainly see no myth, no figment of imagination. And we see someone more than special, or a promoter of love, or a wise philosopher. We see God in the flesh, the one promised to come and save. We answer with Peter, "Jesus is the Christ of God."

But now comes a turn in the story that at first seems strange and harsh. Instead of congratulating Peter on seeing with faith rather than just retinas and rods, Jesus issues **a strict command not to tell this to anyone**. Why? Well, not only were there a lot of wrong ideas floating around about who Jesus is, there were also a lot of wrong ideas about what kind of saving the Christ was coming to do.

You see, even if people understand who Jesus is, they also must grasp the kind of salvation he is coming to bring. It's not enough to know his true identity, you also must know his true mission. Back then, many people were looking for a Messiah to come and bring them worldly greatness. They thought the Messiah was coming to restore the glory days of King David, to throw off the shackles of Roman oppression. Briefly put, they thought the Messiah was coming to save them from worldly trouble and bring them worldly glory.

You can even see this attitude in Jesus' own disciples! At the beginning of the book of Acts, just before Jesus ascends back into heaven, his disciples ask, **"Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"** They knew who Jesus was, but even then, at the very end of their time with him, they still had this notion lingering in their hearts that Jesus had come to save them from worldly trouble and give them earthly glory.

That's why Jesus gives his followers this strict command not to tell anyone he is the Christ. With all these wrong ideas out there about the Christ's mission, even if people knew who Jesus was, they would be looking to him for the wrong kind of glory. They would try to crown him as a worldly king to rule an earthly kingdom of Israel. And, in fact, they did do just that after Jesus fed the 5,000. He had to run away so they couldn't.

Yes, Jesus is the Christ. But the Christ's mission is not to give worldly glory and power. In fact, his mission is to suffer and die. **He said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law. He must be killed and be raised on the third day."**

Must suffer many things. Must be killed and be raised on the third day. This is the salvation that the Christ of God comes to win: he saves souls from the punishment of sin, eternal damnation, by suffering and dying for sin. He comes to be raised to give salvation from death to all who believe in him. In order to achieve this, he must suffer, be killed on the cross, and rise on Easter.

Jesus is the Christ of God. And the Christ's mission is to save from spiritual disaster with his cross.

Today many crowds still get Jesus' identity wrong. They look with only eyes and do not see the Christ of God. Others are blessed with faith to see as the Christ, the Son of God who comes to save. But what are we looking for him to save us from? How do we understand his mission to save?

I want Jesus to save me from health problems and money problems and family problems and work problems. I want Jesus to give me success and glory in my body, in my work, in my relationships, in my

finances. He is the Christ, after all. He is the one who comes to save. But I have misunderstood the Christ's mission. His mission is not to save me from worldly trouble and give me worldly glory. No, he came to embrace the cross, suffering, and death so save me from my sins.

And now he invites me to follow his path: to be his follower who accepts his mission to save my soul and embraces the problems and sufferings of this world: **Jesus said to them all, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me."**

So, what is this self that Jesus us tells to deny, literally, to "turn aside"? My self wants the easy life. No pain, no hardship, no struggle. My self wants salvation from all that is difficult and frustrating in this world. Jesus says, "Deny that desire. Turn aside that urge to have me save you from everything tough here and now. Instead, follow me and carry your own cross."

Jesus takes up his cross on his mission to save us from sin. To do this, he denied himself. He denied himself worldly glory and comfort. He refused to take the path that was easy, instead embracing the path of pain and cross when he prayed, **"Not my will, but yours be done."**

Understanding his mission, we follow him and do the same. We do not look for deliverance from worldly hardship as we follow him, but instead embrace it as we follow him. Our Christ's saving work was the cross. We carry our own willingly as we follow him.

Because what will happen if I look for Jesus to save me from the wrong things? What will happen when those the crosses of illness or financial stress or broken relationships enter my life? Why, I will think: "What's wrong with me? What's wrong with my faith?" Or, even worse! "What's wrong with Jesus? Where is he? Isn't he supposed to save me?" My faith will fray and frazzle.

But when I believe not only that he is the Christ, but that the Christ's mission is to suffer the cross to save from sin, I will not panic and despair when crosses come my way. Instead, I will say: "My Christ carried his cross. I will carry my own as I follow him. Being his follower is salvation from sin, not from earthly trouble."

But, we may ask, why? If the Christ saves, why doesn't he just save us from everything? Why not save me from both my sin *and* my money trouble? Why not give me both heaven *and* joints that don't ache? Why not save me from hell *and* let me have every promotion I'm in line for he? If he can do it all, why doesn't he?

Because every cross we carry reminds us of his. Why else would Jesus tell us to take up our crosses **daily** and follow him? We follow a Christ who suffers the cross to save from sin. Every worldly trouble, every sorrow, every cross of our own follows his in faith.

And now, here's the really beautiful part. Because Jesus is the Christ who goes to the cross to save from sin, you will be saved from every cross in this world. What we suffer now will end. We will have all the wealth in the universe. We will have perfect health that never fails. We will never think of death again. We will live in glorified bodies and never shed another tear. Because Jesus went to the cross, all our crosses will one day disappear.

Jesus says: **"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."** There is another life after this one. Anyone who wants to save his life now – to have peace and glory and health and life here and now – will lose the glory and life to come. But those who follow Jesus,

who gave his life, those who for Jesus' sake are willing to lose every good thing in this world – even life itself – will have salvation, and the perfect life in heaven that Jesus came to win.

So do you see what a difference this makes in our lives? When, for example, an illness comes, will I ask Jesus to save me from it? Of course! No one wants to be sick! When I am short on money, will I ask Jesus for more? Of course! No one wants to be broke! But if these problems come and stick and grow into crosses, will I say, “Jesus, you’re the Savior! Why aren’t you saving me from these problems?” No. Every day I will bear up under them in Jesus’ name. Every day the problem lingers, I will carry the cross remembering how Jesus carried his for me.

That was the Christ’s saving mission: **“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law. He must be killed and on the third day raised to life.”** It was a mission he succeeded in carrying out, and we know it because of what he said at the end: he was on the third day raised to life. The Christ’s mission was to save from sin with his cross.

When I see the Christ’s mission to save with his cross, I joyfully take up my own each day and follow him, until I reach the goal of his saving work: entrance into the heavenly kingdom, washed clean by the blood he shed.

There, he never suffers a cross again. And neither will we. Amen.