

The Surprising Work of the Christ - Matthew 16:21-28
The 14th Sunday after Pentecost- August 30, 2026

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 16:21: *“From that time Jesus 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.”* This is the Word of the Lord.

I. Peter v. Jesus

Last week, Peter was the star student of the Gospel lesson. When Jesus said to the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”, it was Peter who said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” He nailed it. As you remember, Jesus called him blessed and then declared that He would give the keys of the kingdom, the forgiveness of sins. Last week’s Gospel lesson is a huge one in Matthew as Jesus is revealed to be the Messiah. But it ends on a strange note: after all the great stuff to celebrate in that text, the last words are, “Then [Jesus] strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ” (Mat 16:20).

“Go and tell no one about Jesus.” That’s hardly the best slogan for an evangelism campaign; in fact, it sounds like something our old sinful nature would say. But this isn’t our old sinful nature: this is Jesus—the Christ, the Son of the living God—saying to His closest followers, “Now that you know who I am, don’t tell anybody.” But why would He say such a thing?

All sorts of theories have been offered—right down to logistics and crowd-control, but the reason is evident. Sometimes in talking theology, we speak of “the person and work of Christ.” It might sound a little stuffy and abstract, but it isn’t. The **person** of Christ is who He is. The **work** of Christ is what He does. To get the Gospel right, you’ve got to know both of those: if you get the person or work of Christ wrong, you’re going to get the Gospel wrong. And there’s never a better example of this than Peter in our Gospel lesson for today.

This is the same day, same conversation as last week: this is what happens next. Peter has just proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. In other words, he’s gotten the person of Christ right. The disciples know who Jesus is. Now that they’ve got that down, it’s time for Jesus to tell them the work of Christ—what He’s come to do. So He does: “From that time Jesus 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.”

That’s clear enough to you and me: the work of Christ is that the Son of the living God goes to the cross and dies for the sins of the world. This is hardly earth-shattering news for us, since we’re blessed with 2000 years of 20/20 hindsight. But for Peter, this is more than a shock—it’s impossible. It just can’t be. It is so wrong in Peter’s mind that he finds it appropriate to take the Son of the living God aside and rebuke Him: “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” The work that Christ describes doesn’t match with the person of Christ, thinks Peter, so Jesus must be wrong. The Son of the living God just doesn’t get pushed around by chief priests and then killed. He’s way too powerful for that. The Christ is way too glorious for that. It would be far too submissive and weak and shameful. There is no way that Jesus is going to be killed, not if Peter has anything to say about it.

There's little doubt that Peter means well, which is why Jesus' response must come as a shock: "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a hindrance to Me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." It's got to be a crushing moment: Peter—who got the person of Christ so right, is now Peter—who got the work of Christ so wrong that the Christ has just called him "Satan." The accusation is correct: at the moment, Peter is trying to do the same thing as the devil. He's trying to prevent Jesus from going to the cross to die for the sins of the world. Peter is trying to prevent your salvation. If Peter gets his way, you're in hell forever.

Peter's problem, says Jesus, is that he has set his mind on the things of man, not the things of God. The things of man work in such a way that glory builds and power increases. In the case of the Christ, man's plan for the Messiah is pretty clear: it can only be that the Christ will grow in power and gather more and more followers to Himself. It can only be that He'll eventually become so great that He's invincible, and He'll sit on a throne and rule over His enemies who can't lay a finger on Him, while taking care of His own people. That's how the things of man work, because man sees power and might as the glory and the goal. So in Peter's opinion, the Christ is supposed to have same game plan as, say, Nero, Stalin and Hitler. He's just going to be a good guy, rather than a tyrant.

According to the things of man, it's unthinkable that the Messiah would be beatable, shameable, and killable. If that's true, according to man, then He just can't be a very good messiah. And that's exactly what the devil wants you to think, because then you'll never be happy with Jesus.

The things of God are different, because God isn't a sinful man with a lust for power. By nature, God is powerful; but He is also a servant. He does not desire to exercise His power by cracking heads and crushing His enemies. He desires to express His power by means of mercy and service. So when the Christ appears, He is not there to rally the troops, draw the sword and lead a glorious revolution. He's going to save sinful mankind by serving sinful mankind. And how will He do that? By the ultimate act of service, the ultimate sacrifice. The Son of the living God—holy and righteous—is going to bear the guilt of mankind on the cross. He's going to suffer the judgment that they deserve so that they might be pardoned for their sin. He's going to die so that sinners can have life.

That's how it goes according to the things of God, who is both almighty and by nature a servant.

The things of God are foreign to man: not inconceivable, just foreign. In other words, we can grasp such ideas of sacrifice. In fact, we often applaud them. We rightly honor the soldier who throws himself on the grenade so that his brothers survive. We applaud the one who runs into the burning building to save the child, or the one who gives up his place on the lifeboat. We're in awe—and even shamed—by those who give up much and devote themselves to a life of caring for the unfortunate. There is a part of us that knows that such service is right. But at the same time, we don't want to **BE** the guy who falls on the grenade or the one who sacrifices to live a life of service. We much prefer power and being served. It's a disturbing evidence of the slavery of sin that we can easily say, "I understand how heroic and praiseworthy such sacrifice is...and I don't want that to be me." The lure of power and ease is too strong.

But the things of God are things of sacrifice and service. That's why Jesus says, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

These words aren't very mysterious, really. The one who follows Jesus also follows His teaching. Jesus comes to serve, so His disciples are to serve. By serving in a sinful world, Jesus suffers—and God uses that for the good of the world. For following Jesus and serving in a sinful world, Christians will suffer—and God will use that for good, too. If your life is about serving and saving yourself, you're going to lose it all; it's the one who denies himself and trusts in Christ who is going to be saved. If you live by power and might, you've got a shot at gaining a chunk of the whole world; but living by power and might destroys the soul: for the soul has life only because of Jesus' sacrificial service, and the soul lives in service to others.

You live because the Son of the living God died for you. What powerful service and sacrifice is that!

II. Bearing Crosses

It's important that we keep on saying the Nicene Creed in our services, because it has those words, "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary And was made man; And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate." With those words, you're saying, "Get behind me, Satan: Christ was crucified for us—for me, so that I might have eternal life for His sake!"

Now, there are assaults on your faith because you're still attracted to glory. There's always a subtle temptation to believe that, because you're a Christian, life should go easier than it does. Or, to put it another way, there are things that could happen that would cause you to pull Jesus aside and say, "Far be it from You, Lord! This shall never happen to me. I'm one of your followers"

What I mean is this: creeping around your mind are certain trials that you especially want to avoid, certain crosses that you dread bearing. It might be dementia, cancer, stroke. It might be rebellious kids or an unhappy marriage. It may be the prospect of living alone. But the possibility bothers you greatly, so much that you start to propose deals to God along the lines of, "I will trust in You because these things don't happen to me."

Instead of potential crosses, they might be actual ones. You've suffered some sort of setback or blow that has you reeling and saying, "I thought God was more powerful than this. I thought He was more faithful than this. Why has Jesus failed me? Does God even exist?"

It is difficult to discuss this when these things are happening. It is far better to prepare for them beforehand. The truth is that you've got the person of Christ right, but like Peter you've got the work of Christ wrong. You want miracles and wonders and power on demand, not mercy and strength and patience in tribulation. You want Jesus to work with might and power, but Jesus still ministers to you chiefly with mercy and grace. You want immediate deliverance from affliction: yet Jesus, who used His suffering on the cross to deliver you from hell, still works through suffering—including the crosses you bear—for your good. To accuse God of being faithless during trial is simply not true, for the One who has already shown His faithfulness by dying on the cross cannot be anything but faithful to you now.

The law here boils down to this: do not base your understanding of God's mercy and faithfulness on how life is going. Let me repeat that: do not base your understanding of God's mercy and faithfulness on how life is going. Hear of His mercy and faithfulness in His Word, and rejoice in it **despite how life may be going.**

Because this is true: Christ took up His cross that you might be His follower. Or as Luther puts it: “that I may be His own”. He laid down His life to gain life for you. Risen again, He has given you new life in your baptism, and He continues to grant you grace by His Word and Supper. As His way of saving the world perplexed Peter, so His way of permitting suffering will perplex you; but just as the Lord did not abandon Peter, neither will He abandon you. The day is coming when the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and many rightly fear that Judgment Day. You do not. Rather, you know that you are already innocent before God for the sake of Jesus, and you know that Judgment Day is the day when your sufferings are finally ended, and only life and glory remain.

All this is yours for the sake of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God; who went to Jerusalem, suffered many things and was killed, and on the third day was raised. All of this is yours because of His WORK, and because of his work, you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.