

Year A Proper 22 The Pinpricks of Fulness Matthew 16 vv21 to28

Just before this snippet of the gospel story, the disciples have finally openly recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Peter has declared to Jesus, with wonder and joy, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And right *after* this gospel snippet, comes the Transfiguration of Jesus on the Mount – Jesus revealed in the coming glory of the fulfillment of God’s kingdom, the glory that belongs to Jesus and to his followers. But in between these glorious and joyously enlightening moments, in between comes the tough part: today’s part of the gospel story.

Peter voices the conviction of all of the disciples: Jesus is the Messiah. From then on, Jesus begins to show them, starts to unpack for them, the necessary truth that being the Messiah means that he will suffer and die at the hands of the religious and political establishment. Hearing this for the first time is a blow to their hopes and dreams and Peter won’t accept it. As I’ve mentioned before, in the opinion of the Jewish people awaiting the coming of the Messiah, a dead Messiah is a useless Messiah. That simply doesn’t make sense to them. A horrified Peter scolds Jesus: “This must never happen to you,” he says to Jesus. “You mustn’t die.” As well meaning as this may have been, Peter was attempting to pull Jesus off course, to convince Jesus that he could have the glory of being the Messiah without the messiness of suffering and death. Jesus’ harsh response to Peter pulls us back to the time of his temptation in the wilderness when Jesus had ordered, “Away with you, Satan!” (Matt.4:10). Today we hear, “Get behind me, Satan!” directed at Peter. Jesus doesn’t cut ties with Peter and order him to leave as he had with Satan but, rather, he tells him to take his proper place behind him – to follow him, learn from him. This isn’t the first time that Peter has reminded us of the devil’s wilderness temptations: “If it’s really you, tell me to come to you on the water”.

We heard these words as Peter tested Jesus a couple of weeks ago. What is going on with Peter? Jesus explains: “you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things,” he tells Peter. This is a struggle we all experience: human will against the will of God. We are constantly pounded, day in and day out, with the world’s idea of security, success, power, strength and these clash with God’s ways. Peter is shocked and offended by Jesus’ announcement that he must die. “Peter is like a man who has just been named campaign manager of a promising [candidate for Prime Minister] who astonishingly hears the candidate proclaim that he can accomplish his goals only by being assassinated” (*Matthew*, Thomas G. Long, 189). In the opinion of the world, a suffering, dying Messiah is an absurdity: God’s strong agent of wholeness being weak? Suffering and dying? Freeing and saving God’s people through losing his own life? Peter cannot wrap his head around God’s ways and, if he can’t trust the apparent weakness and defeat of the Messiah on the cross then he will be a “stumbling block” in Jesus’ path. Jesus’ path is to Jerusalem – he must go, he says. Why? Because on the third day he will be raised. God will show the world that violence is not the ultimate power, death will be defeated.

Like Peter, we must constantly battle against the world’s way of thinking that contradicts the way of life in God’s kingdom. Jesus’ life – of healing, forgiving, loving, including – shows us God’s ways. Paul helps us in his letter to the Romans today (Romans 12:9-21). He lays before us a life of love – a life that is always bringing people together, not excluding; a life of generously giving to others, not accumulating and keeping; a life of helping and forgiving, never taking revenge. This is part of what is included in a life of taking up the cross of Jesus and following him.

If any want to become my followers, says Jesus, they must take up their cross to do it. When he says, “If any”, he means not just some but everyone, every single person who would call themselves a follower of Jesus, everyone who calls themselves a Christian, must take up their cross. What does that mean? First, let’s be clear on what it does *not* mean. Bearing your cross does not mean enduring hard times, illnesses, and daily struggles. That simply comes with the territory of life in a broken world. Here, according to preaching great, Tom Long, is what bearing your cross *does* mean:

On the one side, the command to bear a cross is a crisis for Jesus’ followers because it appears to be the way of losers and the path to defeat. Bearing a cross means more than just reaching down to help struggling people; it means following in the way of Jesus, and that involves standing with those who are weak, opening the doors to those who are unacceptable, loving those who are unlovely. Cross bearers forfeit the game of power before the first inning; they are never selected as “Most Likely to Succeed.” Cross bearers are dropouts in the school of self-promotion. They do not pick up their crosses as a means for personal fulfillment, career advancement, or self-expression; rather, they “deny themselves” and pick up their crosses, like their Lord, because of the needs of other people. (Matthew, Thomas G. Long, 190).

Thankfully, most Christians we know will not literally lose their lives for bearing their cross although, in other parts of the world, many do. But losing your life for Jesus’ sake means more than dying. In fact, Jesus says that if we lose our lives for his sake, we will find it, that is, we will have life, eternal life. So what does losing your life for Jesus’ sake mean if it does not mean death? Jesus tells us in his very next sentence: “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” Gain the world...forfeit your life – lose your eternal life with God.

Again turning to Tom Long: “Bearing a cross may look to the world like a tragedy, but in God’s eyes it is a triumph. Suffering on behalf of others may appear to be pouring one’s life down the bottomless drain of human need, but in the kingdom it is what it means to save one’s life. It is the mystery of the gospel that what appears to crush everything one hopes to be as a human being – bearing the cross of service and suffering – is in fact the only way for a human being to be fully alive” (p.191). Gaining the world means clamouring after what the world values – the 3 p’s of worldly power: property, position, and pocketbook. When Matthew writes the word “world” it is the Greek word *kosmos*. *Kosmos* means “something ordered” and it is used to refer to the world and to adornment. Our English word “cosmetic” comes from the Greek word *kosmos*. Gaining the world signifies accumulating the adornment and order placed on creation by human hands – our monetary systems, the clothes we wear – from “No Name” to Gucci, the house we live in – from “gear to income” to million-dollar condos on the river. The more we are consumed by desire for worldly adornment at an ever greater level, in ever greater amounts, leaves less room in our lives for the desire for God and the way of life of God’s kingdom. God’s ways are not our ways (Is.55:8).

Gain the world, forfeit eternal life. Jesus will come again, he tells us. He will repay everyone for what has been done, he proclaims. We are, perhaps, used to thinking of God’s “repayment” as something negative – a punishment for wrongdoing or lack of doing. Jesus’ words, however, are words of reassurance and encouragement for his disciples and for us. “Although the cross may look insignificant and foolish to the world, bearing a cross counts in the kingdom of heaven, counts to God. A life that is spent soothing the pain of the sick, caring for children in need, hammering nails in houses for those without shelter, sharing

bread with the hungry, visiting those in prison, and denying oneself may seem like a squandered life in the economy of a self-centered age, but in the storehouse of heaven, it is a lavish treasure” (p.191).

It is a lavish treasure we know awaits us. Jesus confidently declares that there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. He wasn't wrong so what was he talking about? Right after this, as I mentioned earlier, is Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain top. Peter and James and John see Jesus in the glory that is his in the fulness of God's kingdom. And then the rest of the disciples and many others, see Jesus in the glory of his resurrection body after God raises him from the dead. This is Jesus – the Son of Man – in his kingdom, his kingdom on earth as in heaven. What about us? Will some of us here see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom before we taste death? The answer is, “yes”, absolutely “yes.” We already have. Since we have the gift of Jesus' presence within us through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have seen Christ among us for, when we bear the cross as he did – when we love, include, forgive, and give; when we fight his fight – we are Christ for the world. We live in God's kingdom. The fullness is yet to come but we do live in the new age of the Messiah. We already see glimpses of this fulness. We see glimpses of the full glory of the kingdom breaking into our world like pinpricks of light through a dark screen. Each time we shine the light of Christ in the world – through every thought, word, and deed of love, generosity, forgiveness, respect, inclusion – that we learn together as we worship – each time we shine the light of Christ, the pinpricks get bigger.

Set your mind on divine things, take up your cross, lose your life in the life of Jesus, and grab hold of those pinpricks and make them bigger...repayment is coming.