

What Are We Saying 'No' To?
Matthew 16:21-28
9/28/08

How many of you have ever thought about what your earliest memory is? My earliest memory that has been verified by my mom was when I was about 22 months old. I have pretty good recall of my childhood. One memory I have was when I was about 3 years old and my parents and some friends of theirs decided we would all go out to get ice cream. The place we used to go had really good butterscotch sundaes and that was my favorite thing to get. I had fallen asleep in the car on the way to the ice cream place and my parents woke me up when we got there and asked me if I wanted a sundae. In my sleepy 3 year old state, I thought they were asking me if I wanted ice cream on Sunday and I got very upset and told them "No, I want ice cream now." It took my parents a while to get me to understand that I could have it now but did I want a sundae.

In this passage in Matthew 16, Peter experiences something similar to my ice cream misunderstanding. He hears Jesus say something and he very emphatically says "No Jesus, this shall not be. God forbid this should happen." But Peter doesn't know what he's saying no to, just as I didn't know I was saying no to my favorite ice cream.

In Matthew 16 starting in verse 21, we read that Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the Jewish rulers and must be put to death and on the third day be raised to life. This is the first time that Jesus speaks so openly and explicitly to his disciples about what is going to happen to him. But Peter seems to only hear the bad parts. He takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. He's speaking very seriously to Jesus, warning him not to talk like this and expressing strong disapproval for what Jesus is saying. The Greek words Peter uses translates to "God forbid! May God in mercy spare you this!" Peter is in essence invoking God to work against the very thing that God has determined must happen. Peter doesn't have a clue what he's really saying.

Now to give Peter credit, this passage really shows how deeply he loved Jesus. To Peter it was unthinkable that Jesus would suffer and die. When we love someone,

we can't imagine someone trying to hurt them. When we believe in someone and that what they are doing is right and good, we can't understand why anyone would oppose them. We are all in the process, or should be in the process, of deciding who we are going to vote for in the presidential elections. For those who have already decided very strongly on a particular candidate, they can't imagine why other people would not vote for that person. Peter has decided very strongly for Jesus. He loves Jesus as a person and he believes completely in Jesus' mission. But he doesn't understand it all. By saying "No" to Jesus in this passage, Peter shows that he really doesn't get the full picture of what Jesus is saying.

Jesus speaks very strongly right back to Peter. He calls him Satan or Adversary. He tells him "get away from me, get out of my sight." I think Jesus means "Don't take my focus off the real goal. Don't block my vision of what I need to do." If any of you have ever been watching something on TV, maybe a sports event perhaps, and someone blocked your view at a very important point, you'll understand what Jesus means when he says here "get out of the way!" Jesus had something important to focus on and Peter's rebuke was only disrupting his attention, not helping him.

He tells Peter, "You are a stumbling block, an offense, a temptation or enticement to lead me away from the proper course of action." The Greek word for "stumbling block" is skandalon from which we get the word scandal. Paul uses this word in 1 Cor. 1:23 when he says that our preaching of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. For people who don't understand the gospel of a crucified and risen Christ, it is offensive and foolish to them. It doesn't make sense. Here in Matthew 16, Jesus is speaking openly about his crucifixion and resurrection and it's not making sense to Peter, a man who loves Jesus like a brother. But the reason it's not making any sense is because Peter has his mind set on the things of men and not of God.

So Jesus goes on in verse 24 to speak to all his disciples and say "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." The word "deny" means to act in a wholly selfless manner, to thoroughly deny oneself. Denying oneself means to give up one's rights and to be subjected to another.

In Roman times, a condemned prisoner was forced to carry their own cross to the place of crucifixion. Jesus did this when he was crucified. The point of this was to show publically that this person was under submission to the rule that he had been opposing. For a disciple to deny him or herself and take up one's cross means to live in such a way as to show that we are under submission to God and no longer in rebellion against Him. We show by our attitudes, actions, words and priorities in life that we are living under God's rule and not our own. The cross we bear is the life of discipleship.

When Vandy and I lived in Germany, we found out about something called "mittags pause." From noon til 3PM every day, things would shut down. Banks, stores, schools, post office, everything would close for mittags pause. This was like the national lunch hour and everybody took a break from work during this time. Now we were American citizens, not German citizens, but we still had to abide by mittags pause. We were living under German rule and no one was going to break mittags pause for our convenience. It affected how we lived. We had to make sure we did our errands before noon or waited until after 3. We learned to not try to conduct any business during those hours. This is like how we live as disciples of Christ. We don't live by our own rules any more, but by His, and it affects our day to day living.

So Jesus is telling his disciples that, in order to follow him, they must live in such a way as to deny themselves and show that they are submitted to his rule and this involves cost. In verses 25-26 Jesus says "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?" To understand what Jesus is talking about we have to understand somewhat of what he means by soul. This word refers to the inner human life. It can mean the ability to love, to have compassion, to understand and sympathize with others, to make decisions that are morally right. Whoever wants to save this from death will end up being separated from it. It will be lost. In other words, whoever wants to retain control of this will end up being separated from it. And apparently it is in most danger of being lost when one tries to gain the whole world. Jesus says what good does it do you to gain the whole world, the totality of the cosmos, and yet lose your ability to connect with God and with others. There is nothing that can compensate for such a loss. Vandy and I were talking about

the current economic mess this country is in. Much of it can be traced back to greed. People have tried to gain possessions, money, power and, in doing so, lost the ability to use moral wisdom in making financial decisions that would be for the good of all. Will 700 billion dollars compensate for that loss? What good does it do to gain the whole world, yet lose our souls in the process?

But the person who is willing to lose all of this for Jesus' sake will find it. When we love as Jesus loves, see things through his eyes, make decisions according to his will, then we find that our souls, our inner lives, are healthy and strong. We can have peace and stability in our inner selves when all the world is falling apart. We can love others when they don't love us. We can give of ourselves without expecting anything in return. We can have the moral wisdom to make decisions that bring good to more people than just ourselves. When we are denying ourselves and living under the rule of Jesus Christ, that is when we really come alive.

But there is more. Jesus had said in verse 21 that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. When Peter told him "no Lord, this will never be," he was saying no to the resurrection. Today, as believers in Christ, we would not say this. Why would anyone say no to the resurrection? It is what gives us hope. Jesus came back from the dead, the first of the resurrection and we will follow him. We have the promise that we will also be resurrected from the dead. Jesus said to Martha in John 11:25-26, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Not only do we live by the power and authority of Christ now but after death we will still live by that same power and authority. Do we believe this?

In Matt. 16:27, Jesus states that the time is coming when the Son of Man will come in his Father's glory with his angels and then he will reward everyone according to what they have done. He's talking about a done deal here. This is going to happen. The Greek word for "what they have done" is praxis and it means the habit or practice or actual doing of something. Even if we die, we will be resurrected and we will be rewarded according to those things we have put into practice. We will be rewarded for what we have actually done, not what we intended to do some day but never got around to, or what we hoped or aspired to do but never reached. Discipleship is important.

Living according to the rule of Christ is important. We have to do what we say we believe. But we have the power of God at work in us. Paul writes in Ephesians 1:17-20, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms." God's power is at work in us giving us the ability to live under His rule.

We are celebrating communion this morning. This is one practice that we do as a church that was given to us by Jesus himself. The night before he died, he shared the Passover meal with his disciples and told them that the bread and wine they shared were his body and blood and that there is now a new covenant between God and humanity in which all our sins are forgiven. We are a new people, the people of God, and we live under His rule. We no longer live for ourselves, governed by our own desires. So let's not say "surely not Lord." Let's not be the stumbling block, the obstacle in the way of what God wants to do in our own lives and in the world around us. Let's say "Yes Lord" to the leading of God's Spirit in our lives and see the power of God at work in us and around us.