



14th Sunday of Pentecost
3rd September 2023

There's no such thing as an anonymous Christian!

Once again, we pick up where we left off last week.

Last Sunday we heard Jesus' question, "*But who do you say that I am?*" and, in response, Peter's great confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:15-16)

This morning we'll focus on the scene that follows. So, in the words of Paul Harvey, "And now, for the rest of the story!"

After Peter made his confession, Jesus commended him and went on to tell the disciples what was to come. "*From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up.*" (Matthew 16:21)

When Peter heard that Jesus was to suffer and die, he lost it. He rebuked Jesus – which, as a disciple, was totally out of place. He was way out of line, but determined not to let this happen. You can just hear the desperation in his voice: "*Far be it from you, Lord!*" (Matthew 16:22) Unintentionally, to be sure, Peter – the rock upon which the church was to be built – became a stumbling block standing in the way of Jesus' destiny to redeem a fallen world.

What I'd like for us to think about is this: The very same people who stand for Jesus often stand against him. As Christians, we need always to be asking ourselves, "Am I a solid rock of faith, or a stumbling block inhibiting the faith of others?" My hope is, by asking ourselves this question, we'll be more intentional about our Christian witness.

Here's the first point: When it comes to standing with Jesus, there's no middle ground. That's why Jesus told his disciples, "*He who is not with me is against me, and he who doesn't gather with me, scatters.*" (Matthew 12:30) You're either for him or against him. Disciples don't have the luxury of straddling the fence.

Many of you know that I am a police chaplain. I think this same principle can be seen when police officers dress for duty. They suit up, put on all that heavy equipment, and go to work keeping us safe. Whether they're responding to an emergency or just patrolling the streets, they're visible – and that, in itself, helps to thwart crime – plus, they're available to come to your aid, if needed. Can you imagine running up to a police officer in a crisis and being told, "Hey, Dude, that's not my problem."?

As Christians, we don't wear uniforms, but it might be a good thing if we did. Others need to know whose side we're on. We need to be recognizable and visible in the community if we're to bear witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "*You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill can't be hidden. Neither do you light a lamp, and put it under a measuring basket, but on a stand; and it shines to all who are in the house. Even so, let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*" (Matthew 5:14-16)

There's no such thing as an anonymous Christian. You're either for Christ or you're against him. When it comes to bearing witness to him as your Lord and Savior, neutrality isn't an option. Neither is mediocrity. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we're expected to live by a higher standard than the world around us. Jesus asked his disciples, *"What more do you do than others?"* (Matthew 5:47) If you only love those who love you, big deal! Everybody does that.

"Therefore you shall be perfect," he said, **"just as your Father in heaven is perfect."** (Matthew 5:48) That doesn't mean you have to be sinless or never make a mistake; it means that you should strive for the righteousness of God and not be content with the status quo.

You hear it all the time: "But everybody else is doing it!" Even if that were true – which it's not – it's no excuse. As Christians, we're called to live by a higher standard; and when we do, others are sure to take notice. If you don't think you have an impact on others – think again. You have a tremendous influence, which is all the more reason to live by a higher standard than the world around you.

Paul writes that there is another reason we are to live by a higher standard. He tells us we're expected to act on the basis of what's best for all concerned, not just as our wants and wishes.

In Paul's day, the big controversy in Corinth was whether it was a sin to eat meat that had been offered in sacrifice to idols. Some said yes; others said no. It nearly split the church. Paul said that eating meat offered to idols is not a sin. But, if eating meat offered to idols causes someone else to sin, then you shouldn't eat it – not because you don't want to, or think it's wrong – but out of respect for what's best for all concerned. That's what Paul was writing about in 1 Corinthians 8:8-13.

So, life is not just about you. It's about what's best for those around you. What you do has a tremendous effect on others. You can either be a stumbling block or a rock of faith. This is why, after Jesus rebuked Peter, he went on to say,

"If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever will lose his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25)

This is a paradox the world has yet to comprehend: How can you gain life by losing it? The answer lies in the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus died for the sins of the world and, in dying, he was raised again to eternal life. When we follow his example and walk in his footsteps – serving others, rather than seeking pleasure and avoiding pain – we come to experience lasting peace, joy and fulfillment, such as the world has never known.

Here's the bottom line: Seek life and all its worldly trappings, and you'll lose it; lose your life in devotion to God and service to others, and you'll find it.

The cross is the answer – a stumbling block to all who would bring God down to their level; yet, the cornerstone of God's kingdom on earth. Put your faith in him and, not only will you experience life in abundance, you'll be a solid rock of faith for others. Let's finish by remembering the beautiful words of Isaac Watts:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!

All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.