

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

September 3, 2023 – PENTECOST 14 / PROPER 17, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Carrying our Cross for Christ*”

Old Testament	Jeremiah 15:15-21	(God will deliver from evil those who love Him)
Psalter	Psalms 26:1-8	(The Psalmist trusts the Lord, loves His house, and shuns evildoers)
Epistle	Romans 12:9-21	(St. Paul’s guidance for Christian living: love, bless, rejoice, live in peace)
Gospel	St. Matthew 16:21-28	(Jesus: Any who wish to follow Me must take up your cross)

TV commercials seem to stay in our minds long after we’ve seen them. Even the characters from certain ads have a way of living far beyond the merchandise itself: One only has to think of Clara Peller—the “Where’s the Beef?” lady—or Mr. Whipple, the grocer. Although the ads have changed, his presence has been linked with the product for years. Oddly enough, that Charmin commercial has a certain relevance to our Gospel text today—and to our lives.

You remember the spot: Mr. Whipple, who appears quite shy, has to call a halt to all the women shoppers that find Charmin tissue so irresistible they feel compelled to pick it up and squeeze it. Mr. Whipple catches the ladies in the act in numerous ways. But in the end Mr. Whipple, with great embarrassment, finds himself guilty of squeezin’ the Charmin too.

In today’s Gospel, we also find Peter doing the very thing he wouldn’t have wanted to do—if only he knew what he was doing in the first place. In last Sunday’s Gospel, we heard Peter confess that Jesus is Israel’s long-awaited Messiah.

Jesus had asked His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They offered several different answers, then He pressed them: “But who do *you* say that I am?” Peter responded with one of history’s great confessions of faith: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” “*Christos*,” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew term “*mashiach*” or “messiah,” which simply means “God’s anointed One.” In Old Testament times, only three types of people would be anointed: Prophets, priests, and kings. Jesus of Nazareth is all three. However, the Jews were not expecting a prophet or a priest. They wanted someone who would rule over God’s people—a king.

In being open to a revelation from God about Jesus’ true identity Peter understood that Jesus was no mere man, but that He was one with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus was God the Son who came to earth to show and to tell God’s people, the Israelites, about Himself in a very real and personal way. And for one moment, Peter had put it all together. He knew who Jesus was!

But in today’s Gospel account, he quickly turns from a hero of the faith to a stumbling block for the One whom he had identified as his Savior. He goes from expounding great and eternal truths, to babbling and carrying on about things he doesn’t understand, or even appear to want to comprehend. Peter’s mindset changes so quickly that Jesus equates him with the devil as He cries out, “Get behind me Satan,” you are tempting Me, you are hindering Me, you are trying to make Me deviate from the path I am destined to take.¹

What happened to Peter? Like that Charmin tissue, he is being squeezed by forces that are hard to stop: by tradition, by his own human nature, by the limits of his own ideas. Peter desperately wants to think Jesus is actually wrong about what He’s saying. No! Suffering, pain, and the Cross are not part of my plan for the Messiah!

Jesus had been explaining to His disciples the concept of the suffering servant (as Isaiah had prophesied), the martyred messiah. But Peter, likely for love of Jesus, as well as mired in his own sense of what constituted righteousness and glory, took Jesus in his large fisherman’s arms and protested, “God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you.”

Squeezed by a tradition that lifted up a conquering Messiah, Peter simply could not fathom that Jesus would be persecuted, tortured, and killed. And His own human nature did not want that for his friend and Master. *Who would?*

But Peter—not Jesus—was wrong. Pain, torture, agony, and death on the Cross was God’s eternal plan for Jesus, whom He sent into the world to suffer for the sins of the world so that our salvation would be eternally secure. Jesus tries to explain to Peter that this is God’s will for Him, saying, “you are not on the side of God, but of men.”

Human beings cannot understand the mind of God, Jesus says, but God’s ways and plans are always the best—and that’s why we must trust Him. God intended for Jesus to suffer temporarily, so that *we* would not have to suffer in eternity. And, at those times when we, or a loved one suffer in this life, we must believe God allows it for a reason.

Jesus wants Peter to understand that God’s plan of salvation doesn’t involve a grand conquering army or the pomp and circumstance of a king, but rather, suffering, death, and the Cross—after which God will raise Him on the third day. *Resurrection!* Way more impressive than a political victory—because Jesus conquered death itself! That is when God would bring the glory for which Peter longed. God would deliver Jesus from the hands of the devil and exalt Him to the throne of heaven at God’s right hand—all because God is a God of love.² And real love is sometimes messy.

Jesus goes on to tell Peter especially, but also all of His disciples—and us—that everyone who wishes to follow Him must take up their cross. Christ knows that following Him is no easy matter. There will be sacrifices—we talked about that last Sunday. There will be giving up certain friends who are bad influences; saying no to injustice even when it might get us in trouble; helping people whom others don’t approve of; and in general, re-setting our priorities in life so that we are focused more toward *eternal* life through Jesus Christ. Our Lord is telling His friends—and us this morning—that whoever loses their life for Him in this world, will find it forever in eternity. Whoever abandons the demands, values, and standards of this world, whoever is willing to live *all for Jesus*, that person will find life in Him, because Christ is Life itself—and the Truth and the Way.

As an example of a believer who truly took up his cross for Christ, I’d like to share with you the story of Maximilian Kolbe, a Roman Catholic priest who lived from 1894 to 1941. Kolbe was sent to a Nazi concentration camp because of his faith. On May 28, 1941, he was transferred to Auschwitz. One day a man in Kolbe’s block escaped. All of the men from that block were brought out into the hot sun and made to stand all day without food or drink. At the end of the day, the escapee still was not found. So the Nazi commandant told the prisoners that ten men would be selected to die in the starvation cell in place of the man who had escaped. One, a Polish sergeant, was among those selected. He begged to be spared because he was worried that his family would not be able to survive without him.

As he pleaded with the commandant, Father Kolbe silently stepped forward and stood before the officer. Turning, he asked what the priest wanted. Kolbe pointed to the Polish sergeant and said, “I am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children.” In disbelief, the commandant stood silent for a moment. Then he allowed the sergeant to return to his ranks, and Kolbe took his place in the starvation bunker. There, the guards who removed the bodies of those who had died were used to the sounds of cursing and screaming.

But when Kolbe and the nine others were put in the bunker, all the guards heard was the sounds of Fr. Kolbe and his companions singing hymns and praying. When Fr. Kolbe could no longer speak due to hunger and lack of energy, he whispered his prayers. After two weeks, the cell had to be cleared out for more prisoners to be thrown in. Only four were left alive by then and Kolbe was among them. So the guards gave each a lethal injection. On August 14, 1941, Kolbe paid the ultimate price for following the call of his Master “to take up his cross and follow him.”³ On October 10, 1982, he was canonized a saint by Pope John Paul II.

None of us will likely ever have to pay the price that Saint Maximilian Kolbe did. But thanks be to God for all His saints and martyrs who have shown us the meaning of true sacrifice. May their prayers help us to deny ourselves and take up whatever cross the Lord gives each of us. And may Christ assist us to carry that cross until He returns to call us home. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Michael Green, “The Message of Matthew,” *The Bible Speaks Today: New Testament* (IVP Publishers, 2020) p. 178.

² Adapt. Tim Zingale, “Man’s Way vs. God’s Way,” 22 August 2005, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/man-s-way-vs-god-s-way-tim-zingale-sermon-on-discipleship-82276?page=1&wc=800) <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/man-s-way-vs-god-s-way-tim-zingale-sermon-on-discipleship-82276?page=1&wc=800>> 22 August 2023.

³ Adapt. Martin Dale, “Jesus Said: If Any One Would Come After Me ...” 23 August 2005, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/jesus-said-if-any-one-would-come-after-me-revd-martin-dale-sermon-on-discipleship-82305) <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/jesus-said-if-any-one-would-come-after-me-revd-martin-dale-sermon-on-discipleship-82305>> 22 August 2023.