

Matthew 16:21–28

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' 23 But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27 For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Faithful God, how blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Sanctify us by your Word and Spirit so that we may glorify you in the company of the faithful; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The cross is such a potent symbol. It became the symbol for Christianity, despite the fact that it was originally a symbol of pain and humiliation. Jesus' resurrection turned the cross into a symbol of joy and power for many. I would be willing to bet that it is the most popular symbol in jewelry and clothing worn today, even by people who are not very devout Christians. Yet despite its popularity, you will not find it as part of most secular businesses or institutions. Despite our belief in the cross as a symbol of joy and love it still tends to be used as a sign over tragedy and death.

An example of the cross towering over various temporal "wrecks" gained new poignancy when we saw on the news that iron-girder cross towering over Ground Zero. That cross became one of the most frequently photographed parts of that grim and terrible place. It is now on permanent display as part of the 9-11 Memorial and Museum in Lower Manhattan.

As an example of crosses not being part of new developments, I use this example. Some years ago, author and New York Times columnist David Brooks detailed the sprawl of what he called "Sprinkler Cities." These are giant suburban metropolises that have sprung up from virtually nowhere in the last few decades. In order to make such Sprinkler Cities attractive to would-be new residents, city planners are very careful to build all the basics. Chief among the absolute necessities to which people insist on having access are, of course, shopping outlets. And so, among the first things to spring up from nowhere on once-desolate patches of prairie are giant slabs of asphalt on which are built things like Home Depot, Petco, WalMart, Bed Bath & Beyond, Barnes & Noble, Linens-n-Things, and many more big box stores. Some of these shopping areas, Brooks says, are so big they could almost qualify for membership in the United Nations. Ringing these behemoths of commerce are other vital landmarks of the newly formed Sprinkler City, including theme chain restaurants of the Applebee's/Olive Garden/Outback/Cheesecake Factory/TGI Fridays variety.

I have had the "privilege" of seeing one of these sprinkler cities be created. For over twenty years my family would go to a camping weekend in the middle of July. We would meet friends at a county park near Rogers Minnesota. When I first went, Rogers was a blip along I-94. Over the years they improved the exit ramp. Huge developments of townhouses and

neighborhoods of copycat McMansions were built. And sure enough, soon after that came a Target, Cub Food, Home Depot, Culvers, Kohls and a whole range of stores, just across the highway from the formerly little town of Rogers.

If you travel through these new suburban meccas, you'll see all the logos, signs, and brand names you would expect to see, but you'll see no cross, and actually precious few churches. In fact, Rogers is part of the Minnesota Valley Presbytery, and SanDawna has been talking about doing a church plant there, because there are not many churches, Presbyterian or otherwise, in the area. It's hard to know what the cross of Jesus would have to do with a Sprinkler City. The cross is not a symbol of strength. Instead it's a somber symbol of weakness, of death, and of tragedy.

As I said just a moment earlier, for many people in this world, that's the function of a cross: to mark a bad and tragic thing. You see fields of crosses at Arlington National Cemetery and in the vast graveyards near Normandy, France. That's what we do: we place the cross at locations of death. We do not generally, however, sink crosses into places of life, liveliness, or anything else that has to do with our everyday business.

Even in Lower Manhattan prior to September 11, 2001, no one would have thought to place a cross anywhere in the plaza of the World Trade Center, and rightfully so. Not only would such a religious symbol have been shunned as a violation of church and state, seeing the symbol of the cross smack in the midst of this country's greatest symbol of economic power would have made no sense to most people. What would a cross have had to do with all that bond trading and all the other important business that people once conducted in the Twin Towers? Indeed, the editor of Time magazine—in the special edition of the magazine that came out after the terrorist attacks destroyed the World Trade Center—wrote “If you want to humble a nation, you attack its cathedrals.” The Twin Towers were cathedrals of commerce. But they needed no cross when they were standing upright. The Twin Towers were about power, about wealth, and about life!

Yet in Matthew 16 Jesus presents the cross as something to which we should cling to every day. Despite our Christian familiarity (perhaps over-familiarity) with the idea of “taking up a cross” and following Jesus, this image is actually quite counter-cultural, cutting against the grain of expectations in terms of what people usually associate the symbol of the cross with.

I think it's time that we are reminded of what the symbol of the cross stands for. We need to be aware of how at odds this familiar image is, even with what many faithful church members believe. I think the cross has become more of a political statement for some, flaring into people's consciousness mostly when controversies erupt about the placement of a cross in public places or when someone talks about prayer in school, or our country being built on “Christian “ values. Do we in the church understand the daily reality of the cross in our own lives, or do we tend to “reserve” the cross for special occasions, political fights, or cemeteries?

One of the commentators talked about “The Hill of Crosses” in Lithuania. It began in the 19th century. When Lithuanian citizens were murdered by the Russian Czar, the people would memorialize the victims with a cross. Soon many crosses began to go up. The Russians hated them and so tore them down. But the memorial kept building and today there are thousands upon thousands of crosses. What began as a memorial of death became a defiant symbol of hope eventually. Hope emerged from the crosses.

That is something of what Matthew 16 is finally about, too, though it did not look like that to the disciples. Remember, this scripture follows immediately on Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, which I talked about last week. Jesus told the disciples in verse 20 to keep that secret for now, but what he did not want to keep secret was his own understanding of what

being the Christ involved. He knew what his mission was, and he knew the probable results of that mission. I think that sometimes we are so keenly aware of Jesus' words of his impending suffering and death that we assume it was all part of some plan (presumably God's plan). But what if, instead, God's plan was to send Jesus to bear a word of redemption and grace and love and the cross happened as a result? In other words, it's not that the only way by which God could conceive of redeeming humanity was for God's son to be violently put to death, but rather that God in Jesus came amongst us bearing a vital message of love and acceptance even though Jesus knew that humanity's likely response would be to reject the message and kill the messenger. In this sense, the cross was not Jesus' goal, but rather the outcome of Jesus' fidelity in the face of unfaithful people. He didn't choose the cross but rather trusted God to work even through the extreme of the cross for the sake of the world God loves so much.

That is why, as verse 21 tells us, Jesus talked about these grim topics "from that time on." But, of course, it didn't sit well with the politically minded disciples, starting with the one who had just made the "correct" confession, and whom Jesus had just blessed mightily for having done so, namely, Peter himself.

Peter still holds the world record for the fastest change in spiritual status. Within the span of only a few minutes, Peter went from "Rocky the Blessed" to "Satan the Scandal"! The change-of-status happens when Peter, takes it on himself to give Jesus a little lesson in theology. So, he pulls Jesus aside away from the other disciples the way the teacher pulls aside the intern who is messing up the lesson plan, in hopes to set them back on track. Peter assumes the posture of a superior instructing an inferior.

I can imagine Peter with his arm draped around Jesus' shoulder, quietly but sternly upbraiding Jesus, "God forbid this should ever happen to you, Lord!" That's when Jesus calls Peter a Satan, but not just that: he calls Peter a skandalon, a scandal, which in Greek refers to a rock over which a person stumbles. Peter is still getting depicted in rock-like terms, but this time he's not a foundation stone but a trip-hazard! Then, just to be sure Peter, and now all of us, get the point as to what makes the difference between being a useful building block or a dangerous stumbling block, Jesus launches into his famous words about bearing the cross.

The cross, and our ability to let our everyday life be shaped by that cross, is what creates the difference. But that means that the thing, that even hell itself cannot touch, is not something powerful the way the world reckons such things but something weak. It's weakness that hell cannot attack. It is vulnerability and the gospel way of suffering servanthood and gentle love that the devil and his hosts cannot exploit.

Jesus indicates that just viewing life the way he viewed it will itself likely lead to a degree of suffering. If the cross, and faithfulness to the Jesus who died on that cross, is going to shape our everyday lives, then conflict with the prevailing culture should be expected. There may be certain promotions we shouldn't get or take as Christians, certain business opportunities we should decline, certain things we won't go along with, say, or do.

A person can gain the whole world, Jesus warns, but still lose their soul. And if in the end, when Christ returns in glory, a person does horrifyingly discover that his soul has been forfeited, then not all the riches of this earth will be enough to buy that soul back. Some things come to us only as a gift of grace. Life with God is just such a gift, and it was purchased for us by Jesus on a cross. Every day and in every place, that cross towers over us, and we should not want it to be any other way. Amen