

Sermon on Matthew 16: 21-26

I now Challenge...

Last week we considered the passage just before our text from Matthew for this morning. Based on that passage we considered the question of identity: the identity of Jesus and how our understanding of that identity defines or should define our own. In that text where Simon declares Jesus the Messiah, the living Son of God we find a high point of the story—one which resonates with our faith that Jesus is indeed the living Son of God. For his insight, Simon gets a new name—Peter which means rock. For the disciples that would have been a glorious, shining moment; a moment when it seemed the hopes of Israel were about to be realized; that deliverance was at hand. But as we move past that passage we begin to see how just naming an identity does not necessarily mean that the fullness of what that identity actually represents. Although we did not focus on this last week, that passage ended with this injunction to the disciples: “Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” At this point Jesus had accomplished part of his mission: those closest to him now knew who he was. But now comes the next part of the mission where Jesus begins preparing the disciples to accept that although deliverance will be accomplished, it will not occur in the expected manner. Perhaps it is the need for this change in the disciples focus on the liberation of Israel from its oppressor to the purpose of God acting to bring about reconciliation for all that caused Jesus to caution the disciples about spreading this news. They did not fully understand Jesus’ mission. Today’s passage begins with the phrase “From that time on.” Most of you probably remember from English classes that every play, every novel, every story has a turning point which then directly leads to the climax. Matthew 16: 21 marks that turning point. Up until the recognition moment Jesus has called together this group; this motley crew of Galileans whose previous occupations had nothing to do with the established religion. These men would be the ones to whom he will entrust his message and mission. He has demonstrated to them who he is by teaching with authority, by healing and by casting out demons. The future leader of this group has named him Messiah, the anointed one of God. All of these things are exciting happenings, creating hope within the group for a positive outcome to their worldly situation. Then we get these words indicating a pivotal change. But the change is not in Jesus, but in the message Jesus is conveying telling them what being the Messiah truly means. “From this 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.” That was not the image Simon Peter and the other disciples carried of what it meant to be the Messiah. That was not anywhere close to what they wanted to hear about the mission of the Messiah. It did not resemble in any way the hope and expectation of Israel for their long awaited leader who would free them from their enemies. Simon Peter was a Jew and could not fathom a Messiah who would just give up his life at the very moment when the crowds were increasing and his fame was spreading. According to their expectations he should be seizing the leadership of Israel. So Simon Peter responded vehemently saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” We have now come to the third way that Peter earned the name of rock. Peter does not want to lose his leader, the one on whom he has placed his hopes of Israel’s liberation. Jesus tells him, “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.” Jesus accuses his rock upon which the church will be built as now as not only a rock of little faith which loses focus and sinks, but also as being an obstacle intent on putting a roadblock in the mission of bringing the kingdom and salvation. Peter knows that going to Jerusalem will be dangerous, so he wants to draw Jesus away from that path. He is attempting to thwart God’s will to provide a pathway for the lost to enter the kingdom. Being the Messiah, Jesus looks at his own mission with the mind and vision that sees not from a human perspective but from the perspective of what God is about. From that time on Jesus began teaching the disciples the hard lesson about what the immediate future will bring. But even as he taught them that hard lesson which turned their expectations upside down, Jesus told the disciples that the suffering and death were not going to be the end of his mission. Jesus’ summation of the events to come in Jerusalem ended with, “and on the third day be raised.” Yet the disciples did not hear that portion. They did not have any teachings concerning resurrection. Resurrection was outside their experience, but they were very familiar with the portion which spoke about suffering and death at the hands of those in power. From our vantage point over 2000 years later we accept these verses as being the necessary path. We are viewing them in the light of the suffering servant songs of Isaiah. We live long after the glory seen on Easter morning. We call ourselves Easter people, celebrating the resurrection. We don’t really participate in Peter’s objection to Jesus going to Jerusalem because we know what Jesus meant by the phrase “and on the third day be raised.” We equate that with our own path to salvation. But when we come to the next paragraph in the passage; now that becomes a different story. We become unsure of what is being asked of us. That is a message spoken to the disciples that concerns what those who desire to follow Jesus must do. Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” We really do not like this condition that Jesus attached to being his follower; this taking up of a cross. We are not sure about this suggestion that we need to lose our life in order to find it. We prefer to follow Jesus’ instructions to the gathered crowds about how to live: Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. The giving of alms to feed the hungry is much easier to do than taking up a cross would appear to be. Yet in fact, we often have trouble just trying to follow Jesus as a moral guide: that call to love your enemies is an injunction that really seems a little bit extreme to us. It is much easier to demand revenge and call it justice than to offer forgiveness and love when we or our loved ones have been harmed. These things which Jesus taught about our behavior toward one another are definitely part of being a follower of Christ. Just as knowing who Jesus is remains an important part of our identity as followers. But we also are told that we are to take up a cross if we would be a follower. We don’t seem to know how to recognize this cross which is ours. In some places in the world, proclaiming Jesus as Messiah results literally in being willing to go to the cross as Jesus and the disciples did, to lose life. But we don’t live in those places. For many of us the cross is a symbol found in jewelry and in or on church buildings. It has become separated from the crucifixion and its gruesome nature. Familiarity with the symbol and our rather bland and often rote statements concerning it has tamed the rather complex nature of Jesus’ stand against the powerful which led him to the cross. Because we live where our lives are not endangered for declaring we are followers of Jesus does that mean that we don’t have a cross to pick up? I would guess that depends upon how we understand what a cross is. If we

truly confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the living Son of God, then the cross should make a difference in how we think about God and in how we live, our lives should be transformed by that identity. Just speaking the words “Jesus is the Messiah” requires only the exertion of the mind. It does not mean that we are taking up a stance against the powerful. It does not mean that we are acting in ways to secure justice for all. I don’t think that when Jesus told the disciples that to be followers that they must take up a cross and follow him that he was setting up a pattern for martyrdom for its own sake, denying oneself just to be able to claim discipleship would have no purpose beyond the selfish. It would nullify the first item on the list of things a disciple does. Neither do I imagine that any cross which I might take up could come anywhere near the sacrifice which Jesus made. So what do I think that this verse is about? First, I would say that it is not just an invitation which is meant to show your willingness to go the distance or a statement of self-sacrifice or self-denial. There are three verbs in this statement: deny, take up, and follow. Each one is in the imperative. Although they are within a subjunctive clause which begins with that very large two letter word IF what follows is not subjunctive. Each of the verbs within the clause states a command. What are we to deny?—self interest. What are we to do? Take up our cross and follow Jesus. The verbs in the sentence are linked together so as to make all three actions a part of one action—becoming a follower of Jesus. The denying self interest is a part of taking up the cross, just as taking up the cross is a part of following Jesus. If you think about it, following the teachings of Jesus require giving up self-interest in favor of community.

As I was studying this text and its meaning for us today, it thought about a phenomenon which has been sweeping the country lately. It has gone viral as the current terminology puts it. I am talking about the ice bucket challenge for ALS. It has been happening nationwide for about a month now. It involves someone taking a bucket of ice water and either having someone else pour it over them or doing it themselves. After this demonstration that they have accepted the challenge and donated money to the ALS foundation, they then challenge others to do the same. There are so many videos of this on Facebook or on U-tube that you can see it has struck a chord in every imaginable group within our culture, the ordinary and the famous. Those who follow sports have probably seen someone from that arena take the challenge on television. Why do I mention this now? Well, it seems to me that Jesus has issued a challenge to all who would follow him: taking up a cross may be no more than truly following in his footsteps—seeking to live fully according to those things which he taught regardless of personal consequence and then from that vantage point challenging those whom you know to go and do likewise. When I read this text, I hear Jesus saying, I now challenge you.