

The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost – 2020

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Romans 12:9-12

Matthew 16:21-28

I used to make a few bucks in elementary school with a card trick I learned. It was pure deception and I didn't mind taking some kid's lunch money. I shuffled the cards and made everything look totally legit. But I peeked at the bottom card, memorized it and kept my left thumb on it. Real honest like, I pulled the cards back, one at a time, and asked the patsy to tell me when to stop. Upon selecting the card they wanted, face down, I pulled the bottom card and showed it to them (without me seeing it). Then I started turning cards over, insisting that I knew what their card was. I would intentionally pass by their card, building in them a false confidence and baiting them, I would say, "How much do you want to bet that the next card that I turn over will be your card – while I did this I motioned to the next face down card in my hand. They knew that their card was face up, that I passed it some time ago, and that the next card in the deck certainly wasn't their card – as did all the witnesses. Five bucks was usually the bet. Then I rifled through the already turned up cards, found theirs, and turned it over. Pure trickery.

Bait and switch. A shell game; it's all fraud. "Bait and switch" is when someone advertises some product, typically a really good deal, and then after the customer commits, an inferior product is inserted or else something way more expensive. Lucy Van Pelt is the epitome of bait and switch. She promises Charlie Brown that she will hold the ball for him to kick, but she gets her jollies by pulling the ball away at the last minute and watching Charlie Brown go flying. How many people have tried to get out of a timeshare? The vacation deal of their dreams just didn't turn out to be what they thought. And they're stuck.

What do you think of Christianity – is it honest? Why are you a Christian? Do you ever get the feeling that the church is trying to pull a "fast one?" This morning we are going to take a sober look at an event that puts all those questions right in our lap. It's intense, this episodic drama. There's definitely something to learn, something to think about. Your life is in view. How you live your life is in view. How Christianity informs how you live your life is in view.

It begins with Jesus beginning to show his disciples what He must do – go to Jerusalem, suffer, be killed and on the third day, be raised. It's an interesting choice of words by Matthew – Jesus *began to show* his disciples what He was about to face. Show them – not teach them, show them. Do you think that you show others your Christian faith? Do you show others the pride of place which the Lord Christ has in your life? In the face of a pandemic, where the government has said that Christians should not gather for worship, you got dressed this morning, you intentionally got in your car and you showed something – your faith, your priorities, your trust, your obedience, your devotion, your joy, your mind, your heart. Christians do this sort of thing all the time. Taking the lowest seat. Returning a blessing to those who curse you. Having a ready answer for anyone who asks you about the hope that is in you. Being patient, trusting in the face of tribulation. Feeding the hungry. Comforting the beleaguered with words of the Gospel – our faith is to show.

Jesus showed Peter – showed Peter the cross, the lowliness of what approached, the path that lay before the Lord – and Peter rejected what Jesus showed him. How many of y’all ever talked back to your mother? Is there a difference, not that there should be, but is there is difference between talking back to your mom and talking back to your dad? What would happen if a private talked back to his drill sergeant in boot camp? Can you not just see every disciple’s head snap around to look at Peter? “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” Peter wanted a cross-less Christianity. Peter wanted a bloodless Christianity. Peter wanted a Christian kingdom without a crucified King. Humility didn’t suit Peter’s tastes and it very often doesn’t suit ours. We can rationalize anything, even talking back to the Lord Christ about what Christianity ought to be. There is a danger there. Jesus is exceptionally concerned about His church. Jesus doesn’t want His disciples going off on humanistic flights of fancy. Peter is clearly going astray. What is more, Peter giving voice to this cross-less Christianity has the potential of leading others astray.

Jesus becomes majorly stern, fierce even. You should view what the Lord says next as not only a direct rebuke to Peter and his humanistic religious reflexes (keeping Jesus from the very sacrifice He came to render) but also the Lord is safeguarding His church (you and me and those people sitting next to you) from a cross-less Christianity. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Jesus has a strong interest in protecting the sanctity of His mission, the sanctity of His church, and the sanctity of Christian doctrine. A cross-less Christianity helps no one. A bloodless Christianity brings genuine comfort to no one. The humility of the cross is the glory of the cross. The glory of the cross lifts us all!

This morning we are going to take it one level deeper. Immediately after delivering His stinging reprimand to Peter and Peter’s empty ideas, Jesus puts our lives together with His. Do you believe that you have a cross-less Christian life? There’s no shell game here. There’s no attempt to hide the extension of Christ’s life into our own. “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’” What is the cross of the Christian? Self-sacrificing love, love for God, love for neighbor. What is the cross of the Christian? A preparedness to suffer for our faith in Christ rather than abandon Him, rather than abandon life, abandon love, abandon heaven. What is the cross of the Christian? To put to death our sinful nature, our selfish desires, our petty pride, our allegiance to the world and its vanity. We follow Him. That means that we will have our cross. Compared to life in this world, we would much rather have the one that comes after. This world, this life is passing away.

Our Lord doesn’t bait and switch. He doesn’t promise a rose garden, a primrose path, or cross-less Christianity. Here’s our plain-spoken Lord. “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). Has there been a time when Christian ideals are more out of step in America than they are today? Will this begin to impact your life? Are you prepared for that? Your Lord has redeemed you by His blood, showered upon you a love you didn’t deserve, and He has opened the Kingdom of Heaven to you – He has caused His Spirit to live in you and you truly shine with the light of His glory. The world is not impressed. You will encounter difficulty

because of your faith. So very many have gone before you, some with docile lives living in peaceful Christian communities. Some living under constant persecution, rendering up their lives as martyrs. None of them are you. None of them are living your life. Your life matters. Now, in this place, with the faith which God has breathed into you – your life matters.

We have no interest in engaging in trickery, fraud, deceit. We lift up the Christian life precisely for what it is – life with Christ, sitting at His feet, filling our souls with His Word, receiving His glory in His body and blood, being forgiven and forgiving others, enjoying the richness of His fruit, the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The beauty of this life, the wonder of His love compels us to follow Him whithersoever He leads. Far from a cross-less Christianity, we savor His sacrifice. Far from a cross-less Christianity, we are honored to bear what He gives us, honored to share in His sufferings. When someone promotes a cross-less Christianity they do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men. Out of love for God, love for His church, love for His teaching – we will say: “Get behind me.”