

The Life God Gives

Matthew 16:21-28

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 3, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Last week the Lord told you that the gates of hell shall not prevail against you, this week He tells you that in order to follow Him, you must lose your life.

But then that is how the Lord Himself is. Unless the Lord Himself loses His life, He will not rise from the dead. Without His resurrection from the dead, His authority means nothing. If His authority means nothing, the Church's authority also means nothing and then the gates of hell will prevail.

Furthermore unless the Lord dies the way that the Lord dies the authority that He gave to Peter last Sunday will count for nothing. The Lord gave Peter the authority to release people into the Kingdom of Heaven and to bind people from entering the Kingdom of Heaven. That can only be done with atonement. It cannot be done without atonement.

To live in the Kingdom of Heaven means among other things to live in the presence of God. It means to live in His hidden presence now and to live with His revealed presence in life everlasting. One does not simply live in God's presence if one is a sinner. If someone is a sinner, his heart is defiled with uncleanness. Out of his heart comes murder, theft, fornication, lies, slander, and malice. Whether or not he acts on these thoughts makes no difference. These thoughts are in the heart and they defile a person. That is why the Lord condemned the Pharisees and the scribes and called them hypocrites. He said that on the outside they were all nice and clean, but inside they were filled with all kinds of uncleanness. He accused them of cleaning the outside of the cup and the plate, but leaving everything inside unclean. He exhorted them to clean the inside of the cup and the plate so that the outside would be clean also. In other words it was not enough that the Pharisees had avoided the grosser sins forbidden in God's Law. They had not kept the Law in their hearts. That is why when Jesus fills up the Law as He says He will do in the Sermon on the Mount, He says things like this, "You have heard that it was said to those long ago, 'Do not murder and anyone who murders is liable to judgment,' but I say to you that anyone who is angry with his brother is liable to judgment." Furthermore the Lord states, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not commit adultery,' but I say to you that any man who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Therefore it was what comes out of a man's mouth that defiles him. Out of his mouth comes the things of his heart, fornication, murder, lust, theft, falsehood, and malice. These things exist in the heart and they defile a person.

It is therefore necessary if we unclean and defiled people are going to live in the Kingdom of Heaven that atonement must be made for us to purify us from our uncleanness. If you learn anything from reading the book of Leviticus learn that. Blood atonement is necessary in order to purify people from whatever uncleanness it is that they have. Our loss of original righteousness has so defiled us that we need something better than the blood of bulls and goats to purify us from our uncleanness. They even knew that in the Old Testament. Even when Israel kept the instructions of Leviticus the prophets and others knew that this was not sufficient. This had to be pointing to something more. And that more was Jesus.

And so the Christ, the Son of the living God makes atonement for us. He does it when He dies on a cross. When He made atonement for you, He forgave you of your defilement, all of it. All sins, all diseases, all death, is atoned for you. You are clean. You are forgiven. You will live even though you die.

Therefore it is the death of Jesus Christ that gives the Office of the Keys its authority. If indeed the Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive

the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent, then the Office of the Keys has to be backed by the atonement of Jesus otherwise the authority of the keys is a sham and not a real authority.

If an ambassador told you a message from the king promising you goods and supplies and the king did not make good on the word that he sent you through his ambassador then the word of the king counts for nothing and the ambassador's authority is worthless. But if the king makes good on his promise and supplies what he promised through his ambassador then the king's word is good and the ambassador's authority to speak on the king's behalf is useful and practical. It can be believed. Thus it is with the Office of the Keys. If Jesus had not offered His life to atone for the defilement of the whole world, then the Office of the Keys would speak empty words. The word of forgiveness would not bring about the forgiveness about which it speaks. But Jesus has suffered and died upon the cross. Furthermore He has risen from the dead showing that His death was a unique death among all of the crucifixion victims in the ancient world. Therefore His death does what He says it will do. It ransoms sinners. It atones for their sins. It purifies them of their uncleannesses. His death gives the Office of the Keys the practical power to carry out what its authority entails.

Therefore it should not surprise us that as soon as Jesus gives the authority of the Keys to Peter, He starts talking about His death and resurrection. As soon as Peter confesses who Jesus is, Jesus explains what His identity means.

Therefore if we are disciples of Jesus we will follow Him. If we follow Him we will deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him. We will die.

Now it sounds like Jesus is talking about martyrdom. It may sound to some of us that the Lord is implying that only those who give their lives for Him will be saved. There are times when I have spoken this way as if only the martyrs will be saved.

That is not the case. 1Corinthians 15 states that there will be some who will be alive when the Lord returns and they will receive their new bodies without death. 1Thessalonians talks about those people who have fallen asleep in Christ. They did not die a martyr's death. They simply died with faith in Jesus Christ. These people are in the Kingdom of Heaven just as much as a martyr is.

I do not mean to demean martyrs in saying that. The martyrs shed their blood because of their faith in Jesus Christ. They did not simply say that they would die for Jesus. They actually did die for Jesus. Some of them died singing hymns to God. Some of them died praising God. Some of them died taunting their enemies. They gave their life rather than to relinquish their faith in Jesus Christ. And it may be by way of the way that history has worked out that we believe in Jesus because they gave their lives.

But there are other ways to give our life for Jesus. There are your vocations. There are the things that Jesus has called you do while you follow Him. When you do the vocations to which He calls you, you will die. Whether you give your life in a blaze of Aristotelian glory for the faith or not does not matter. In your vocations you will give your life.

In order to illustrate this allow me to confess one of the worst sins that I commit. I often wish that I were released from my vocations. I wish that I were released from being a pastor. I wish that I were released from being a son. I wish that I were released from being a husband and a father. My flesh tries to cover up how wicked these wishes are by not thinking about what it would take in order to make these wishes come true. It would obviously take the death of a whole lot of people or at least their disappointment and deprivation in order for me to fulfill these wishes. My flesh covers it up by wishing that magically somehow I would be released from my vocations. This sin is worse than all adultery and murder. It is an awful sin because I am asking God to take away the life that He has given to me and give

me the life that I want. I am wanting to save my life and in so doing according to the Lord's judgment I will lose it.

But when I fulfill those vocations they are a big inconvenience. Guys, remember the days when we were not married? Remember when we could spend our money and our time the way that we wanted without having to consult someone. Remember the aggravation when your wife spent your hard earned money on something that you thought the family did not need or worse she spent it on something when you wanted to spend that money on something that you wanted. Think of what you could have done had you been able to spend that money on what you wanted to do, but now the life that you would have had doing that is dead because your wife spent your money on something that she wanted or something that was necessary for the children or whatever. I don't know if women commit these kinds of sins. I suspect that you do, but you commit them in a different kind of way.

Parents remember the days before you had children? It has taken me a long time to realize that the John Sharp without children is dead and he is not coming back. There is no raising that guy from the dead. He will not come back no matter how much I wish that he would come back. And the bitter irony is that while my flesh wishes that when I was childless my flesh wished for a child and was discontent with the life that God was giving me then. God is in heaven right now wondering what it is that I want. I am like a child myself saying that I want one thing and then when He gives it to me saying that I don't want it. But if God were to take it back and make me childless again, I would want a child back.

Think of the things that you would like to do but your vocations get in the way. Think of the big goals and accomplishments that you have in mind to achieve, but you have to do the vocation of husband and father and for me pastor. You know what your vocations are. And they don't seem to allow the time or ability to get done those things that you so much would like done.

The life that you wished you had is the life that dies when you follow Jesus. He calls you to a life that He is giving you. For to live the life that we wish we would live is to live a life full of sin and pride and selfishness. It is to lead a self-centered life and in the end it will signify nothing. It is to gain the whole world and to lose one's life. It is only in losing one's life for the sake of Jesus that one finds one's life.

After all what is more significant than the vocations which Jesus gives to you? Are your little goals really more important than raising children to fear God? When your children stand in their final eternal glory because Jesus died for them and Jesus called you to teach them to believe in Him and even though you would have rather have done something else with your time, you died to yourself, took up your cross and taught them the faith, is there anything more significant than that?

Or if Jesus refuses to call you to parenthood and thereby provides you with the opportunity to serve Him in some other way. It is true what the Scripture says that the single person is more devoted to the Lord because they do not have to sacrifice the time and energy to make their spouse happy. The same thing can be said of parenting. If one is not parenting there are things they are permitted to achieve for the Lord that they would not otherwise be able to achieve. The life of children that they long for is dead to them. Jesus will not summon them to that life. Christy and I know people like this who never received the summons to be parents. We thought we would be those people. Jesus is calling them to something else. And whatever the something else is that serves Him it involves the death of the life that they would have lived had they received children.

The calling of Jesus reveals our idolatry and selfishness in stark terms. We want control of our own life. We want to dictate to ourselves what we will do and how we will spend our time. When it comes to us we want to be our own god, little suspecting that if we get our way, we will find ourselves to be a ruthless dictator dealing out a life that signifies nothing and in the end results in eternal damnation.

There are no vocations in eternal damnation. The reason is that there are no relationships there. It is just you with no one there to tell you what to do and you may live with the little dictator for all of everlasting generations.

And so when Jesus calls us to anything, He calls us to die.

Sometimes the movies get it right.

In spite of recent DC Comics remakes, I still like the 1970s movies of Superman. General Zod comes to earth and takes over the world. The world governments authorize the President of the United States to turn over world power to Zod. Having nowhere else from which to rule, General Zod takes up residence in the White House itself. After four days one of Zod's cohorts tells him, "You are the ruler of all you survey." This is exactly what Zod wanted. He wanted to rule. He wished for it. He coveted it. And when he finally got it, he was bored. So when he was told that he was the ruler of all that he surveyed he simply said, "And so I was the day before and the day before." He got what he wanted and his life was pointless. He gained the whole world and he lost his life and in the end of the movie he did die. And so it goes with all who seize power. They must live in a way that nullifies them in order to hang on to their power, while the maid who is a mother scraping by to raise her daughter does a more noble work than any president or king. She loses her life in her vocations and she gains a life of significances beyond description.

And so it is true for you followers of Jesus what our Lord exhibited physically in His own life. The one who gains his life will lose it and the one who loses his life, finds it.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.