

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 30, 2026
St. Michael's Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong
Gospel reading: Matthew 16:21-28

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, our God and our help. Amen.

Last week in our gospel reading, Jesus ask Peter, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

In this week’s gospel passage, Jesus begins to prepare his disciples for the difficult path that lies ahead. He tells them that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering, be killed, and on the third day be raised again. This is not the kind of message the disciples wanted to hear. Some have given up everything they had to follow Jesus. Others have waited a long time for the Messiah to come save them. And for Simon Peter, he just answered the hardest question asked by Jesus. “Who do you say I am.” As Matt said last Sunday, making that confession could mean his own persecution. So Peter speaks out on behalf of the disciples and tells Jesus, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” What did Jesus do? He sternly rebukes Peter saying, “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.”

We might wonder why Jesus was so harsh with Peter, considering that though wrong intentioned, Peter's response seems to come from a place of love and protection. But the problem is that Peter's priority was not Jesus' priority.

Father Peter Wallace is the author of this month's Forward Day by Day, he speaks about having the mind of Christ in Thursday's meditation. He quotes, John 8:23 when Jesus says to his disciples, "You are from below, I am from above; you are from this world, I am not from this world." Jesus makes a sharp distinction between himself and those in authority. He declares that they think they represent God, yet Jesus tells them they are missing God entirely. Wallace invites us to reflect, "Have we examined our own hearts lately? And are we so caught up in our needs and wants, our own insistence that we're right, that we miss living full lives with God?"

I believe this was Jesus' point in today's message.

Jesus says to his disciples that in order to follow him, they must deny themselves and take up their cross. Wallace believes that another way to think of this is that we should live "above" with Jesus—not forsaking our earthly life, but breaking out of our self-constructed boxes, looking beyond this world's horizon to follow him wherever he beckons. And this is what Jesus meant when he says, "For those who

want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Living life above. Setting our minds on things above...

How do we do this? By living in the Spirit. Being always aware that we are God’s children and that this is our new identity. Everyday, we have opportunities to make choices that are constructive or destructive. If we live in close connection with the Holy Spirit through prayer, daily meditation and regular worship, God will guide us to do what is right.

Recently, I met with my Spiritual Director and he reminded me that all we do is an offering to God. It doesn’t have to be Bible related, or church related. We are instructed by Jesus to approach all of life as an act of worship and to pray continually. Colossians 3 says, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." And Ephesians 6 mentions, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”

This I believe is what Father Wallace and Jesus meant about living above with Christ.

This week, our Bishop met with The National Minority Aids Council — a national HIV organization that offers development to end the HIV epidemic among the most vulnerable communities in the United States. I was encouraged to read this, because this is an example of how we can be bridge builders between our faith and the social needs of the world. Everyday, we are called to be a bridge builders in our own sphere of influence. You may be called to be a bridge builder to your children regarding their faith. You may be called as a bridge builder among your office colleagues. Everyday, we can choose to represent Christ in the world, or choose to remain silent in our convictions. Our actions can be as simple as giving someone a St. Michael's pendent, invite them to church, or be a listening ear to someone who has a problem.

Jesus says to Peter, “You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” So, we may ask ourselves, are we living out the life Jesus is calling us to live or are we resisting what he wants us to do?

I recall when I first began my discernment for ministry, another person who was involved in my discernment committee told his wife that he was moved by the process and maybe he should discern himself. I will never forget her sharp reply to

him, “Don’t even think about.” Jesus 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.”

What may we be resisting God’s voice in our lives?

Jesus’ stern response comes from a sense of urgency. He will soon be facing his own persecution and death, so he needs to prepare his disciples to be his voice and action in the world. “If any want to become His followers, we need to deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow Him.

But what does taking up our cross exactly mean today? Does Jesus want us to pursue suffering and death? Is He saying that a holy life is not about living, but about dying? Does it mean we are to live without joy?

Sometimes we may react to this command by either minimalizing or maximizing the seriousness of this matter. To minimize it, I often hear people tell me, “I’m deny myself chocolate or a week of social media during Lent. Ok, Lord, I’ve done my part. Ok, Father, I’ll even give up my social events on Sunday to come to church. But is this what Jesus meant about denying ourselves?

Or sometimes we may maximize the teaching of denial. I know of Christians whose self-denial strips them of life's pleasures, celebration, and joy.

Unfortunately, I even know of people who thinks self-denial means staying in abusive and unhealthy relationships because they don't believe in divorce. This is definitely not what Jesus is asking us to do.

So, what does Jesus mean when he asks us to deny ourselves in the 21st century?

Jesus is asking Peter and us to learn total voluntary surrender to God. To surrender our selfish desires, ego, and personal agenda, and instead choose to live completely for His will, no matter the cost.

Do you see why Jesus was so stern with Peter? This is important stuff. It's about investing in a heavenly life, not an earthly life. Jesus knows, and we know to a certain extent, that life's possessions cannot give us long term meaning. Learning to surrender isn't something we do later, but something we learn to practice now.

You see, setting our minds on divine things transforms us from self centered thinking to global thinking. Jesus can take what we possess and turn them ten folds bigger for the sake of helping others. It means knowing that our generosity impact the effects of global humanity and creation. Jesus' message, even from

incarnation, has always been about generosity, and never about scarcity. It's learning to trust him and give to those in need. It's knowing that when we do, God will richly bless us indescribable ways. Setting our minds on divine things reminds us when we become too self-focus, and so comfortable that we forget about those who aren't as privileged as us.

When we give up an hour on Tuesdays to greet the students at Otis, we come home richer for the contact. When we spend our money purchasing items for the incarcerated on Amazon, we feel fulfilled. When we decide to come to church on a Saturday to set up Altar Guild, we live a life of purpose. The list goes on and on. That's why Jesus teaches us to prioritize so that we may experience His abundant life.

In practical terms, having the mind of Christ means extending our faith beyond Sundays to the rest of the week. We may think Jesus is asking a whole lot from us, but he knows that it will produce a meaning filled life. "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?"

Yes, there is a cost to being Christ's disciple, but it doesn't compare with the joy and fulfillment we get in return. Just ask Peter and the disciples as they followed

Jesus to Jerusalem. Their journey didn't end when Jesus was nailed to the cross, it only began and expand.

In our modern world, our journey as followers of Christ face different challenges than the disciples — we are faced with AI and decipher complicated truths, we face encounter identity theft, we face extreme material temptations, we face overwhelming stress, and we are tempted to forget the needy. Jesus' teaching of denying ourselves leads us to step out of the vicious cycles of acquisitions and self-protection into being able to see God's truth and to be led by God's truth.

Just like Peter, how often do we negotiate with God to do what we want instead of what God wants? "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.