

15th Sunday after Pentecost
September 13, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Matthew 16:21-26
The Things of God

Dear Friends in Christ,

What if God came to you in January and told you everything that was going to happen in the next twelve months? He would tell you about world events, national events and events in your personal life too. It would be quite a list and we are only 2/3 of the way through the year. After hearing this list, many of us would say something like what Peter said when Jesus told him what would happen in the near future. Literally, Peter said, "Mercy, Lord!" In other words, let God have mercy and not let any of these things happen. But the events of 2020 have happened and the events foretold by Christ would happen just as he said. Like Peter, we do not always understand the things of God. But Jesus was always about his Father's business and always had in mind the things of God.

Matthew 16:21–26 (NIV84)

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. 22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" 23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." 24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

The Things of Men

Peter had just confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God in the previous verses. Peter was on top of the world for giving a good answer to Jesus, the correct answer that so many in the world have missed. But in the verses just read, Jesus tells Peter what the Christ came to do. Peter is no longer so excited to be with Jesus. Peter had a different vision of what it would be like to be a disciple of Jesus. So far, it was good and getting better. Jesus had become more and more popular. Jesus has showed his power over sickness by healing many, his power over nature by walking on water, his power to provide by feeding the five thousand, and his power over all evil by driving out demons. Jesus has preached to thousands of people and more and more had been following him. Of course, there is the occasional run in with a Pharisee or teacher of the law who challenges Jesus. But Christ handles everything with ease.

All is good. Peter and the others must think this good time will continue and get even better. Perhaps they even envision a somewhat peaceful transition of power when Jesus goes to Jerusalem and is crowned king. For that is what they are hoping will happen, that Jesus will rule from Jerusalem like the kings of old. How crushed Peter is when he hears Jesus tell them what will actually happen. Suffering and death are not part of Peter's plan for Jesus or for himself. *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke*

him. *“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”*

Peter had what Lutheran theologians later would call a theology of glory. The theology of glory is a way of thinking that expects the Christian life to be one that is free from pain and suffering. If you trust God and do what he says, you should expect things to go relatively well for you. This theology of glory expects better things to come to you in your earthly lifetime. Those who proclaim such a theology of glory promise that better days are coming if you only dedicate your life to Jesus. They promise that God will bring you success in your career, happiness in your family and peace in your life now. This theology is attractive to people in every place in this world. We sinful humans desire glory now. Our sinful pride thinks we deserve only good things in life. Our sinful self covets a life without problems, a life without suffering, a good life now.

But Jesus reserves one of his sharpest rebukes for this way of thinking by Peter. *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”*

Satan was always trying to make Jesus stumble. If Satan could trick Jesus into sinning one time, the whole world of sinners would be lost forever. Jesus says that Peter is acting like Satan, trying to prevent Jesus from saving the world of sinners. When we tell Jesus that our life should be better because we follow him, we are acting like Peter. When we complain to God that we don't get the respect from the world we deserve, that we should not be struggling with finances or family as we are, that we should not be suffering as we are, we are following a theology of glory and rejecting what Jesus tells us today. Let us repent for our mixed up priorities and attitudes. Let us fight the temptation to have in mind the things of men and instead see the glory in the things of God.

The Things of God for Jesus and for Us

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

These are the things of God: Suffering, death, and resurrection. The things of God are difficult. Jesus went about with the things of God on his mind, as his focus. For Christ saw the goal and the mission that these things of God would accomplish. By his suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, Christ would be making payment for the sins of the world. Christ would be the once and for all sacrifice that all the sacrificial animals of the Old Testament pointed to. And Christ would complete the payment for sin by being killed.

We might be tempted to think that this was easy for Jesus to do since he is the Son of God. After all, we would probably be willing to give our own life to save a loved one or a friend. But would we give our life to save someone who hates us? This is what Jesus did. Christ gave his life willingly for those who mocked him, for those who beat him, for those who pursued the things of men, and for every sinner. While we were still his enemies, Christ died for us. This was not easy for him as his tears in Gethsemane show. Christ bore the cross to give us the crown of eternal life through the forgiveness of sins.

So, what are the things of God in your life?

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”

The glory of the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting will come for every believer one day. Those are the things God has in store for us through Jesus. But the things of God for us now are to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. This is called the theology of the cross, which is the opposite of the theology of glory. The theology of the cross is to have in mind the things of God and these are not easy for us.

To deny one’s self is not something we do by nature. We deny ourselves when we say no to sin and temptation. It is easy to give in to sinful thoughts and engage in sinful talk and fill our mind and eyes with sinful images. But Jesus calls on his followers to deny their sinful nature and continually battle temptation. We deny ourselves when we do what is best for others instead of only looking out for ourselves. In view of God’s mercy, we therefore take time out of our busy day to listen to a coworker who needs to talk after work. We find ways to be generous with our money and things God has given us.

And when suffering comes to our lives, we pick up that cross of suffering and follow Jesus. Instead of feeling sorry for ourselves or blaming God for not giving us glory now, we humbly follow Jesus. We trust that he is with us, that he has forgiven us, and that he will never forsake us. It may be that during times of suffering that others see the glory of Christ the best. For then they see us trust in Christ for all that we need for this life and the next.

The Lord does not reveal every detail of every day of our lives. That knowledge is too much for any of us to handle. He simply asks us to trust our Savior who accomplished the things of God for us by his death and resurrection. So each day we pick up whatever the day brings and follow our Savior because we know where he is taking us – the glory of heaven.

Amen.