

Sermon – Matthew 16:21-28
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Grace Lutheran Church
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“Which Way Did He Go?”

Friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Some months ago, a member of Grace gave me a wonderful gift – a print by Japanese artist Sadao Watanabe. You may not know the name, but you’ve seen his work; it hangs in various prominent places around our hallowed halls at Grace. The piece depicts Jesus lovingly kneeling before Peter, washing his feet. For months I’ve been grateful for this gift, and for months I’ve been unsure what to do with it. Wall space in my office is at a premium. I won’t recount for you the various items that hang upon those walls, or the assorted knickknackery that decorates my workspace. Not only would that be a colossal waste of our time, I’d really just rather you stop by to chat and check it out for yourselves. The important point for our purposes is that I didn’t seem to have space for this portrait of Christ at work. Mostly because of one section of my wall on which hang assorted degrees and certifications, all those wonderful, framed pieces of paper that serve to allege my competency to do ministry. It wasn’t until this week, as I stared absentmindedly at the artwork and contemplated today’s gospel reading that it hit me. I heard a voice, surely belonging to the Spirit: “Hey, Dave; have you considered moving some of those things about *you* to make room for *me*?” And so, I have. The portrait of the servant Christ now sits at the center of the stuff about me, forever a reminder that I forever need to be reminded that I am not at the center of my own story. That place belongs to Christ alone.

2. Today, we reach a hinge point in the gospel story. Just last week, in response to Jesus' question, Peter made his bold confession: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter gets it right, and then he gets it wrong. Wrong because he can't yet comprehend what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. "From that time on," we are told today, Jesus began to tell them that he must – *must* – go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. That he must give himself up. Peter objects – this must never happen! But not only does Jesus rebuke Peter, he tells Peter what it will mean to follow. We must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and walk in Jesus' footsteps. Peter, proclaimed just a moment ago as the rock, now threatens to become the stumbling block. Will he get out of Jesus' way, make room for his Messiah? Will we? Do we, in the end, have any choice in the matter?

3. It matters, I think, to reflect on what Jesus is *not* saying. This is not about enforced asceticism. We will not win our way into the Kingdom through moralistic self-improvement. Discipleship is more than saying no. And it is not simply about saying no to ourselves, nor is it about saying no to who we are, to who God created us to be. Losing our lives to find them does not mean that our lives, our selves, are erased. Self-denial and cross bearing are not about abasing ourselves or enduring abuse. This is, rather, a call to mutual love and giving ourselves to each other. A relationship in which each person promises to put the other first creates mutual care and support, beauty and joy. But a relationship in which one person denies themselves while the other always takes? No. This is not the way of the cross, for the way of Christ does not make demands that Christ will not endure himself. And the way of the cross never leaves us as less than who we were; it always makes us more of who God always intended us to be.

4. Self-denial is not always so obvious. The gospel has a way of showing up in surprising places. This week the world lost Dolly Parton, the country singer who some have noted was the last person liked by all segments and factions

- of Americans. She had a hardscrabble childhood in Tennessee which she overcame in so many ways but which she upon which she never looked down. Perhaps it's hard to see through the rhinestone glitter, but underneath was always empathy for other. As her obituary in *The New York Times* puts it, "even more remarkable than her profusion of accolades and awards was Ms. Parton's unstinting generosity of spirit – her commitment, born of deep religious convictions and an immense heart, to seeing the humanity in all people." Her heart and her faith led her to fund scholarships and hospitals, COVID-19 vaccine development and pediatric infectious diseases research. Through her Imagination Library, she gave away more than 300 million children's books to help promote literacy. Dolly Parton was larger than life, but she also kept quietly losing herself, giving herself away for the sake of others. We might call hers a Romans 12 life, marked with genuine love and steadfast goodness in the midst of a world that chases the wrong thing.
5. Such faithful living does not, of course, flow from us. It begins in the cross, which is where Jesus was headed all along. He tells the disciples that he "must" undergo suffering and death. We would do well to not jump to one or another theory of atonement or get lost in divine necessity. Jesus is less interested in describing how salvation works than he is in doing the saving. He must walk this path because this is what God's love looks like. It is a love that gives itself away. The grace of it all is that Jesus uses the one thing we all have in common, the one thing that we cannot finally outrun, try as we might, to save us. Jesus uses our death – that which was once only the end – to bring us into new life, in this world and the next. He takes our sin and our idolatry of the self to the cross. The old you is left behind in the tomb, and together we emerge into the light of God's love. We who were lost are now found. We who were dead are alive. In that mercy and grace, we can trust that we can continue to give ourselves away, for who we are is unendingly built on the foundation that is Jesus Christ. Your lives, friends, have been bought by Christ. You have been given the Kingdom. Why old on to the old ways? Get

out of the way. Make room at the center. Deny your sinful self and be who you are saved to be. See that Jesus is already where he wants to be, at the center of your life. Get behind him and follow. Take up the way of the cross, following Jesus into lives of grace and generosity. Following Jesus ever into life. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.