

Title: “Shaped by the Cross, Sent into the World”

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Matthew 16:24-28

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Service Readings: Jer. 15:15–21; Rom. 12:9–21; Matt. 16:21–28

Jesus forms us through His cross. Our lives are no longer self-preserving but given freely for His mission in the world.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

August is ending and with it the exploration of how we at St. Mark are stepping into our vision and stepping out into the community. Over these past several weeks we have explored how our baptismal life is one of growing upward, growing deeper, and reaching further. Our sermons used each one of these phrases as lenses through which we have unpacked Scripture. Our Education Hour offered us a chance to hear from some of the ministries of our church and how they nurture an environment where we can grow upward, grow deeper, and reach further. Last week we paused to reflect on our individual contributions to the mission and vision of our church. We are empowered by God’s Word and Sacraments and it is through the receipt of his gifts that we are compelled to serve others. And today, we are hosting [have hosted] a ministry fair where you are [were] able to explore many of the ministries and invited to join in their efforts to serve.

My goal in this morning’s message is not to summarize these past weeks. Instead, it is to ensure that the thread that weaves through all of these messages and all of these activities is properly understood. You see, what this month *has not been* about is a call to action. I know that sound’s strange, especially this week as we host[ed] the ministry fair and invit[ed] you to consider joining one of them. Maybe it’s *because* of the ministry fair, as valuable as it is, that this message is all the more important.

Here is what I mean: Stepping into the vision and out to the community is not, in Lutheran terms, Law. Our goal this past month has not been to call you to do more – to study the Bible more, to join a small group, or even to volunteer – all for the sake of *doing* more. That’s not what August has been about. In a word, August has really been about *fruit*. And I think that to unpack that word, a perfect place to start is in our Gospel passage. Just prior to these verses, Peter confessed that Jesus was “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Our passage opens with Jesus predicting his own death. There is a conversation between Peter and Jesus, and then, verse 24:

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

If you want to follow Jesus, you must take up your cross. On the surface, and especially in the context of our entire month, it sure sounds like Jesus is asking his disciples to... *do*. Reading it in this way, the call to discipleship is to *earn* your way into the circle of fellowship with him by your works. Do enough, and he will call you brother or sister. Suffer enough and you are part of the eternal Christian club. That, simply, is not what Jesus is saying. And this is the fundamental distinction between Law and Gospel: “Do this and live – that’s Law. Christ has done it all – that’s Gospel.”

And so as we hear Jesus speak to his disciples that they must deny themselves and take up their own crosses to follow him, he is not offering a prescription for their lives. If their cross-bearing were the means by which they earned a place with Christ, then Christ's cross would not be enough. But his cross *is*. His suffering, death, and resurrection have accomplished everything necessary for their salvation – and for ours. Christ's cross is enough.

Jesus is telling us what his disciples are called to do. But he is not telling us what we must do in order to become his disciples. There is an enormous difference. The cross we bear is not the price of admission into his kingdom. Christ has already paid that price with his own blood. Because Christ has called us, forgiven us, baptized us, and made us his own, his command to deny ourselves and take up our crosses becomes the *description* of the life he now works in us. It *describes* a life shaped by the cross of Christ. When we, through faith – a faith given as a gift by the Holy Spirit – believe in Jesus, when we believe that his death covered our own sins, when we trust in his promise that we will be resurrected to new life, then we live differently. We *take up our cross* as we serve others – using our own time, our own talents, our own treasures for *their* good instead of ours. We *take up our cross* as we long to learn more about who our Savior is – and spend time in God's Word to do so. The cross we bear is not the Gospel; it is the *fruit* of the Gospel. Christ's cross saves us. Our crosses do not. But because Christ's cross has saved us, we can now take up our crosses in love and service of our neighbor. The cross we bear may involve suffering, sacrifice, inconvenience, and even rejection. But we do not bear it in order to earn Christ's love. We bear it because we already belong to Christ. And even in the midst of suffering, Christ gives us joy as we serve our neighbor.

Our lives are lived shaped by the cross of Christ. It was *his cross* that *he picked up* – not in service to himself, but in love and service to us. And he calls us to do the same. Pick up your cross, live in love and service to others, not because it provides you any advantage but because Christ first did this for you.

It is *this* thread that is woven through every sermon in every Lutheran church. Christ died so you could live. And so Christ gathers you. He baptizes you. He feeds you with his very body and blood. He speaks his word into your ears. And then he sends you back into the world – not to earn his favor, but because you already have it. The Christian life is not a life of trying to earn what Christ has already given. It is a life of receiving his gifts and bearing the fruit of those gifts in love for our neighbor.

This life, transformed by the power of God's Word, is not one of works, but one of love. It is one of *fruits*. It is one of *responding* to Christ's love for you.

And this same thread has been highlighted throughout our August sermons and events. We step into the vision, not as a work. We step into the vision as a response because Christ has first claimed us as his own. In our baptism he grafted us to himself so that we could share in the fruits of his cross. We step into the vision because we have been transformed. We no longer live for self, but for Christ. And the fruits of our life transformed propel us outward, into our homes, our workplaces, our communities, and beyond. And in doing so, we live the life described by Paul in our Epistle.

¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.¹⁷ Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

So if today you found a ministry where you can serve, wonderful. Sign up. Give your time. Share your gifts. Serve your neighbor. But don't do it because you think St. Mark needs you to prove your faithfulness. And don't do it because you think God will love you more if you volunteer. Do it because Christ has already loved you.

And if you don't know where you fit yet, that's okay too. Keep receiving. Keep hearing God's Word. Keep coming to the Lord's Table. Keep living in your Baptism. Christ is not finished bearing fruit through you.

So what have we been talking about all month? Growing upward. Growing deeper. Reaching further. Stepping into the vision. Stepping out into the community. Serving in ministries. Caring for our neighbors. Is that Law? No. Not because God has stopped commanding us to love our neighbor. He hasn't. But because none of these things are the price of belonging to Christ.

Christ has already claimed you.

Christ has already forgiven you.

Christ has already died for you.

Christ has already risen for you.

Christ has already baptized you into His death and resurrection.

Christ already feeds you with His body and blood.

You don't serve so that Christ will love you. You serve because Christ loves you.

And so, St. Mark, step into the vision. Step out into the community. Grow upward. Grow deeper. Reach further. Not to become what Christ has called you to be. But because, in Christ, he has already made you his own. And now, let His love bear fruit through you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen