

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
September 13, 2020

**Better Together:
The Obstacle to "We" is Me
Matthew 16:21-26**

²¹ 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, the chief priests and the 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 concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

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. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

"Better together." You would think that the household in our Gospel lesson would illustrate that. It should have been the perfect household. After all, the leader was perfect. In this family, it should have been obvious that "We are Better Together."

Our Gospel lesson reveals they were not a perfect "We"! Jesus even calls one of them "Satan," adversary, enemy! The problem wasn't with the leader of the group. The problem was in Peter and in all the other disciples. From this account, it is clear that **the obstacle to "We" is me!**

It was probably about this time of year, about six months before his crucifixion, that Jesus took his disciples to the far north in Galilee, to Caesarea Philippi at the foot of Mt. Hermon. There he asked them the critical question. Who do you say I am? Peter responded for the entire group: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

It was at that point that Jesus begins, for the first time, to explain what it meant that he was the Christ, the Anointed One that the Old Testament foretold.

²¹ 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, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter was guilty of selective hearing. He heard the suffering and death. He missed the fact that Jesus would rise victorious from the dead. That idea of suffering and death was not Peter's view of Jesus' ministry. The Messiah could not die like that: *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"*

Peter isn't the only one who wants glory without going through the cross. In our Old Testament lesson (Jeremiah 15:15-21) Jeremiah complains to God. "Never Lord, this should never happen to me. I did everything right. I followed the rules. Why am I suffering so?"

"Never, Lord, this should never happen." That's what I've been feeling for the last six months. Never, Lord, this should never happen that a pandemic closes the churches. "Never, Lord, this should never happen." That's what I feel when those whom I love and care about suffer.

Lord, we are your children. We are trying to do everything right. Bad things like this should never happen!

Jesus' response to Peter startles me. It is like a sharp knife that would cut into my heart. "*Get behind me Satan.*"

Jesus called him Satan! Adversary! Enemy!

Why such a harsh word?

Peter's view of Jesus' ministry was the same one that Satan had offered to Jesus in the wilderness. After showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, the devil promises: "All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me" (Matthew 4:9). Satan's temptation? There must be an easier way. Is pain and cross really necessary?

Satan claimed to know better than God. Peter claimed to know better than God. So Jesus cuts him with that sharp word: "*Get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*"

Does Jesus speak that kind of cutting word to us: "Satan! Adversary! Enemy!" He does when we complain to God that he is making a mistake in the way he rules our lives and our world right now.

Never, Lord, this should never happen! I want the glory of being your child. I don't want the suffering!

Get behind me Satan! Why such a cutting remark from Jesus? He was calling Peter to repentance. He is calling us to repentance.

But how did Peter ever get past hearing his friend call him "Satan"? How do we?

Are you familiar with what happens next in the gospels? A week after this conversation, Jesus calls out Peter, James and John to come with him to pray. There on the mountain, he is transfigured or changed so that

the three disciples could see him in all his glory. Jesus brought healing to Peter by calling him to into a close and personal friendship with him. Come with me.

In the message outline, I reference Mark 16:7. I do this because Mark is considered Peter's gospel. We know from 1 Peter 5 that Mark was one of Peter's coworkers near the end of Peter's life. In 2 Peter 1, Peter promises that even though he is going to die soon, he will make sure that his testimony about Jesus is preserved. Because of those references, the church has long considered Mark's gospel as Peter's account.

When Mark records the Easter events, he includes a detail none of the other gospels record. When the angels appear to the women, they say, "Go tell the disciples and Peter."

Peter had blown it again just a few days earlier. He rebuked Jesus again, "Never, Lord, I will never deny you." And so Jesus made sure that Peter was called out by name. The good news of forgiveness through his death and resurrection was true – not just for everyone in general – but especially for Peter.

This is how the Savior brings healing to our hearts as well. He makes it clear that he wants a close personal relationship with us. He calls us by name.

That's what he does in the Lord's Supper. In the supper Jesus promises that his body is present in the bread that we eat. He says, "I gave my body into death for you, personally." When you smell the wine and taste it, remember that Jesus is making a personal promise to you. "The blood that is present in this wine is the blood I poured out for you."

In the sacrament Jesus is saying to us as individuals, "I died, not just for 'everyone,' but for you personally." Here in the sacrament, he is calling each of us by name just like he called out Peter.

It is from this place of healing that we ready to hear Jesus' call: "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*"

What is the cross we are to take up? For a long time I thought the cross was sickness or family troubles or financial disaster, but no one takes up these things. They are imposed upon us. Even unbelievers experience these things.

No, these hardships are not the cross we are to take up. It is how we react to those hardships. How do you deny yourself? The cross is saying "no" to the despair, bitterness, and frustration that well up in our souls.

That cross changes shape as we go through life. For example as a young person in school, your parents are striving to find that balance between giving you freedom to help you learn and grow, but also trying to protect you. Every school age child is convinced their parents are too controlling and protective. The cross is not the rules that your parents give you. The cross is your call to deny yourself, to say "no" to the feelings of rebellion.

In our youth, the sexual desire is especially strong. It is a gift that God has given us that we are attracted to people sexually. The cross isn't the sexual desire. The cross is denying yourself, saying no to the desire to satisfy that sexual desire before that intimacy is protected in the marriage bond.

As we mature, the cross is not the setbacks in our career or the things that happen at work. The cross is to say "no" to our desire to find fault in everyone else and not accept fault ourselves.

In old age, the cross is not that your body is not working as well as it did when you were younger. The cross is to say "no" to the bitterness that swells up in our hearts and leads many an elderly person to speak bitterly about others.

Peter didn't want Jesus to take up the cross. He wanted glory for Jesus right now. Peter's timing was wrong. Glory would come. Jesus would rise victorious from the grave. First comes the cross.

That is true for us as well. In heaven we will enjoy the perfect unity of the Church before God's throne. That unity will be glorious. But now, to be better together means that we are called to take up the cross, to say "no" to anger, to say "no" to our always justifying ourselves and condemn the motives and actions of others.

We will never be perfectly together in this world. We will always have the sinful nature in each of us as obstacles to being "better together." There will be times when there is nothing more we can do to bring healing to a relationship. But the place to always start us with ourselves. To ask, "Lord Jesus, how are you calling me to take up my cross in this situation? What do I have to say 'no' to so that you are glorified, not me."

This cross is not easy to bear. Many a time we will hear Jesus say to us, "Satan! Adversary! Enemy!" You are looking at this from a human point of view and not God's. When Jesus convicts, come back in faith to the Sacrament and be reminded that your Savior loves you and forgives you. In spite of that harsh call to repentance, he still loves you and desires to have a close personal relationship with you. It is from that place of certainty that we can heed our Savior's call: *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Amen.*

prepared by Pastor Pete Panitzke

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My Next Steps

- **Deny Yourself:** Read Ephesians 4:22-32. Paul makes self-denial very practical.
- **Dig Deeper:** Purchase *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours* by Daniel M. Deutschlander.

GroupWork

The Cross is the Path to Glory

1. Read Mark 8:17-38. Peter was appalled at Jesus' prophecy of his death. It went contrary to his visions of glory for Jesus and himself. Share an example of a time someone might say, "Never, Lord! This should never happen (to me, to your church)!"

2. How would Peter ever get past having Jesus calling him "Satan"?
 - a. After discussing that question for a time, read Mark 9:1-6. What was Peter allowed to see? How might that bring healing to Peter's soul?

 - b. What parts of the worship service give you comfort when God's law leads you to hear Jesus call you "Satan"?

3. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34-35). What does "deny yourself" and "take up your cross" mean to you?

4. The Apostle Paul takes up the idea of denying yourself in Ephesians 4 when he talks about putting off the old self. Read Ephesians 4:22-32. In what ways does Paul call upon us to say "No" to ourselves?

5. The message title is: "The Obstacle to 'We' is Me." Why does the first step in healing relationships with individuals involve each of us taking up our cross and following Jesus?