

Mat 16:21-28

Two days walk north of Capernaum, Corazin and Bethsaida...those little blue collar fishing towns where Jesus' and his disciples lived lies Caesarea Philippi - where Jesus takes his students for their graduation test? Are they are going to Disney World...NO... it's more like Las Vegas!

It was a miniature Roman City built in the heart of Northern Israel. There were temples to Caesar and to the Greek gods most notably Pan the fertility god; where people were invited into all kinds of fun acts of worship... usually centered around drunkenness, and debauchery. For Jesus this place represented the ways and nature of man and the modern world.

And when Jesus talks about the gates of Hades (the Greek Underworld) they were in fact looking right at the gates of Hades! In Caesarea Phillipi, where the headwaters to the Jordan River flowed out of the mountains, the temple of Pan was built directly over the river mouth... and it was believed to flow directly from the underworld. The out coves of the temple were filled with statues of Pan - a satyr: half man/ half goat, with horns and a tail...Today we connect Hades with Hell and Pan with the devil.

Now no good Jew would be caught out there... and Jesus takes them right into the heart of Las Vegas to have this conversation with His students... it's their final exam before heading off to Jerusalem...we are getting the last snippet of this talk this morning. It is right HERE in the heart of the ways of man that the church is to be built...upon Peter: both a place and a person (the rock)...and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Here the Greek word for church that Jesus uses is ekklesia. The word means to "call out." it was used as a call for an army to assemble. This is a call to action...offense...onward Christian Soldiers!

And in ancient times whenever a city was built - the "gate" represented where the cities greatest strength was.

And the disciples are looking right at the gates of Hades...pictured on the front of your bulletin...the stronghold of power and corruption...

The church here is the assailant...not the defender...the word ekklesia is a verb...not a noun...to DO church is to assail the injustices of the world.

Church is not an organization or a building insulated from the world...on the contrary it is the Body of Christ in motion - carrying God's word and love into the world at total risk to ourselves. Jesus is not inviting His disciples here to go to church; he is telling them to become the church!

Unfortunately, our lectionary cuts Jesus' conversation with Peter today in half. In the first half of the conversation (last week) Jesus is praising Peter and giving him the keys to the kingdom...wow! Peter's got to be feeling good about Himself!

Peter gives the label of Messiah to Jesus. And it centered on the idea that God would send someone who would be Israel's anointed king. He would rule from Jerusalem with power, and he would kick out Herod and Caesar...the Jews would no longer be ruled and oppressed...they would be free! And Jesus would fix both the political and religious systems that were corrupted by power, money, and abuse. MMMMmmm! Sound familiar!

We'll see that's what everyone expected...and that's what many still think today! And this Messiah would execute God's judgment by casting out the wicked (and that of course would be none of us) and God's true and only children would now rule the world!

King, Priest, and Judge...those were the ideas surrounding their concept of The Messiah. Sounds a lot like what we wish for and still expect today from God or Jesus...isn't it!

So when Peter says...Jesus... YOU'RE THE ONE! The one who is going to "fix" all that's wrong in the world! Jesus says "you're right!" In fact you're

going to get the keys to the kingdom, and you get to say who's in and who's out.

Peter's thinking how AWESOME is this?!!! When I signed on with this Rabbi there was teaching and healing,...the battling of demons... and the crowds coming from everywhere...and now we are in Vegas and this thing's going viral...and now we are going to go to Jerusalem and Jesus is going to toss ME the keys!

You see there's expectations, power and fame and glory all loaded into this one conversation. YET today in the second half of this conversation Jesus explains that He's going to Jerusalem to kick out the Romans, clean up the Temple, bring in His new priests, and let His buddies rule...Nah just kidding!

Instead he tells Peter and His disciples that He's going there to suffer and die at the hands of those very same corrupt priests and romans...WHAT? DID WE MISS SOMETHING HERE?!

Of course Peter rejects this idea as would we! And Jesus calls Peter Satan (the adversary)...you are not concerned with God's Will but merely Your own will...your concerns.

Hey Peter here's the keys to the kingdom...just kidding... you're really Satan! WOW - Look at the contrast! Maybe it wasn't about the teaching and the healing and the crowds...the disciples were looking at this path leading to fame and power ...and that looks a lot like the ways of man and the ways in which WE tend to create the world around us.

Peter thought he was getting the keys to the kingdom of earth...not the kingdom of heaven...he didn't quite get it yet! Discipleship FAIL!

Maybe following Jesus means denying oneself, serving others, taking up a cross, sacrifice, and ultimately losing one's life for the good of creation!

Now today we may not be talking here about literally dying... although that could happen? But it's about who we are right now and it's about the people we are yet to become...I am that I will be!

Jesus is showing us the path of discipleship... and He's giving us a glimpse at transformation and resurrection and new life lived in a new way...not for one self but for the whole of creation.

And it's in sharp contrast to what His students actually thought they were signing up for. Now you see why this location was so important! Fame for one's self, Glory for oneself, Power for oneself...it all leads to this place - Caesarea Philippi (Las Vegas, Philly, Laurel Springs, Hell - anywhere USA).

And most commoners then felt disdain for the rich and famous... not only for the Romans but for their own leaders as well...you see Fame, Power and Glory eventually leads to "selling out" one's life to the world, even as we are convinced that this is living the dream!

Now to get what God has in store for us we need to see things a little differently... we must focus not so much inwardly on ourselves but outwardly upon others. It's not so much about us and them...but rather about WE together. The disciples needed to see the world through their teacher's eyes!

I wonder... what does it mean to say no to one's own life...yet THIS is exactly what Jesus is inviting us to do...to say no to ourselves, our habits, our egos, our status, and our prejudices - those worldly things and possessions that have come to define who we THINK that we are.

Letting go of expectations and control and self-preservation...Going down this path leads to life... BUT make no mistake...it IS going to COST something...isn't it!

What does it look like to die to oneself? What does the church look like when it dies to itself? Look around and you'll notice some of this happening right here and now... Listen to some American Churches or televangelists...They

say things like – God you’re so awesome, I love you so much, and I’m so glad you died, because now I don’t have to, and that’s so awesome and I love you so much! And you know what... sometimes that’s true...but many times things aren’t so awesome are they?!

There’s something mysterious about Christianity that tells us that Jesus died for us...and that’s true! But Jesus doesn’t say Hey Peter...I’m going to Jerusalem to die and now you don’t have to!

He says instead: I have to go and die... and if you want to follow me you gotta too...and it’s going to cost you something...and maybe even everything (at least in a worldly sense)!

I wonder what it would look like to profess a faith that says following Jesus is expensive. And I wonder if that’s not the most compelling thing about being a follower of Jesus.

Notice - whenever a spiritual or religious movement springs up... there’s chaos and excitement and energy and power...but once things get established there’s always the temptation to try and capture and preserve it...how do we capture and keep this thing going...This is true of governments, this is true of the churches... to include all organizations and even our families.

See we shift from creational to survival and I think what Jesus is trying to tell us is that the point of being a disciple is never about survival. It’s about living and thriving... and it’s only the kind of living that comes from a willingness to sacrifice or die to something... so that something new can be born... especially when it comes to our own ego and our own ideologies.

For a community of faith... it’s a willingness to take risks... a willingness to tackle the hard things and acknowledge that YES this might cost us EVERYTHING. We might actually die because of this...this place might not actually exist if we do this...but that is the path to resurrection and to new life!

For a person, a community, a church, to let go. No more control, no more expectations, no more self-preservation...We're going ALL in!

Now here's the irony...if we try hard to hang on to the good ole days...if we try to control everything, if we try and preserve all that we have - it will all fade and pass away anyway (where's the temple of pan today or the Roman Empire for that matter; ALL worldly stuff will ALWAYS fade away! We live temporarily for our stuff and our ego...and then we realize that we may have failed to truly live – for ourselves, for one another, and for the world!

Now to be clear this isn't about literally dying or giving something up all at once... I'm talking about who you are today...right now...and then who you are to become...today and tomorrow! It's in the small and little things (remember the seeds and the yeast)... Peter didn't know all this when he signed on to follow Jesus...it took time, it was an unfolding process...leading to a his own gradual transformation.

So what today is getting in the way of ME following Jesus to Jerusalem? What's THAT thing that's keeping me from being truly alive because I wasn't willing to die to something else? What does it look like for me not to sit in my little gated world surrounded by defensive measures to preserve and control the state of my life...but rather to go out and assault the gates of the world...to go to all the Jerusalem's in our lives, and to risk all to truly live?

Fear, Boredom, Apathy, Anger, Jealousy, Addiction, Religion, Selfishness, Work, Laziness, Arrogance, Depression, Money, Power, Status, Poverty, Envy, Forgiveness, Ego, Judgment, Prejudice, Shame, Secrets, Greed, Social Media, Entertainment...You get to name it for yourself!

What might you consider saying no to - dying to...saying no more today!

What is Jesus inviting you to become!? And never...ever be afraid to ask for help...that's what we are all here for – to do this together - to BE a Church!

To love and help one another follow Jesus... no matter the cost...even to death...and most certainly to transformation... and to new life!

Congratulations on your graduation...now the real work begins!

Your faithful servant,

carmen