

Series: Christ at the Crossroad –Lord of Life, Westfield, IN—Sunday, March 6, 2005
Theme: At the Crossroad of Confrontation
Text: Matthew 16:21-25
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Christ at the Crossroad of Confrontation

Today’s message is part of a continuing sermon series titled “Christ at the Crossroads”. In particular, we will take up the subject of Christ at the Crossroads of Confrontation. Snapshots from the life of the Apostle Peter, as he interacted with Jesus, provide some confrontation models for us to consider, as they may relate to our own relationship with Jesus Christ. I’d like to begin by asking two questions. How many of you here today think that confrontation is a good thing? Raise your hand if you do. How many of you like confrontation? Perhaps you are like me, confrontation averse, that is avoiding confrontation at all cost. Most likely, we’ve gotten that way because of past experiences of being hurt or embarrassed. Confrontation can be a “good thing”, as we will learn today from Jesus, the Master of Confrontation.

Our text for today’s sermon is from Matthew 16:21-25, “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. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” 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.” Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”

You may recall, immediately preceding these verses in Matthew, Jesus asks his disciples “Who do you say I am?” Like an eager student quick to respond, Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” In faith, Peter responded correctly. You may also recall that Jesus responded by commissioning Peter, the “Rock” on which he would build His church. Peter was always the impulsive one, quick to speak and bold to act. Sometimes Peter put his “foot in his mouth”. That’s exactly what happened when Peter took Jesus aside. This time Jesus needed to confront Peter and his quick words. The future of the Christian church depended on it.

Jesus made it clear to the disciples that His mission would take him to the cross, where He would reconcile the world to God by His death and resurrection. Nothing could prevent that from happening. The fate of the world, you and me included, depended on it. That was God’s plan from the beginning. Peter put up a roadblock that day, by standing in the way of Jesus’ mission. Peter broke the golden rule of teacher and student pecking order. No proper Jewish student would dare to challenge his teacher, let alone use harsh words. It was customary for a student to respectfully follow his teacher, staying well back, wherever they walked. Jesus’ roadmap of suffering, leading to the cross in Jerusalem, didn’t mesh with Peter’s idea for the “Christ”. Peter, like many others, thought the “Christ” would establish an earthly kingdom. Peter needed an “attitude adjustment”. Peter needed to realize that he had given in to the whim of Satan. Jesus told Peter he was not only out of order, but he was the devil’s agent. Strong actions call for strong correction. Satan would try anything to prevent Jesus’ victory over death.

Peter’s response is common to all people. We’ve all had times when our own agenda for life doesn’t mesh with Jesus’ plan for us. Maybe there’s something going on in your life right now that’s counter to Jesus’ plan for you. That’s been true in my own life recently. Many of you know that I recently graduated with a Lay Ministry degree from Concordia University. This

certifies me for professional church service. I'll be real honest; part of me would like to go back to being Bob Hoffman, layperson. I'm comfortable there. I've enjoyed my previous church life. I'm uncomfortable with stepping out into public life. I open myself up for confrontation. I started down a road of "postgraduate blues" and was in need of an "attitude adjustment" of my own. Jesus provided it through Scripture by directing me to Romans 11:29 "for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." Jesus was telling me that looking back was not an option. He helped me realize that God provided that opportunity and training for His purpose, to care for His people and to help build His church. It was time to move forward.

After Peter's "attitude adjustment", Jesus then turned toward the rest of his disciples. Let me repeat the words from our text, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Oftentimes, the phrase "take up your cross" is taken out of context and understood to mean some type of physical suffering. Christians have put disabilities, degenerative diseases, or financial circumstances into this context. No, it is not that at all! It is rather a willingness to back Jesus with every ounce of our being and surrender our lives totally to His Lordship, even to the point of death. What might that look like in human terms? Parents, suppose your child became seriously ill to the point of death. Wouldn't one of your first thoughts be "Lord please restore my child, if someone has to die take me instead?"

Peter and the other disciples were literally walking down a road on one occasion and were caught up in another one of Satan's traps. The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest, a reference to a pecking order within the twelve. Jesus confronted them as recorded in Mark 9:33-35 "They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he

must be the very last, and the servant of all.” Jesus made it clear; there is no place for this behavior in the kingdom of God. It’s so easy for us to get sucked into this way of thinking too. We often look at our position, our accomplishments, and our abilities, to see how we measure up to others around us. Satan tries to trap us into boasting when we look good and feeling envious when we look bad. Don’t fall for it!

God is really not interested in our list of credentials. He puts it this way in Micah 6:7-8 “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” What God wants from us, more than anything else, is our obedience. Our attitude ought to be, speak Lord for your servant listens.

At this point you might say, “Man, these are hard teachings.” All this denying yourself stuff. That just doesn’t seem possible. I don’t think I can do this. You know, your right, we can’t, ALONE! Listen again to the conversation Jesus had with Peter (also called Simon) after the first Lord’s Supper. It was read earlier as our Gospel lesson, Luke 22:31-34. “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” But he replied, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” Jesus answered, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.” Jesus had just warned Peter, that Satan had him in his crosshairs.

The wonderful truth about Jesus though is that he prays for his followers, you and me, all the time, so we are able to stand against temptation. Even more wonderful, He not only prayed for Peter, the very next day he went to the cross and died for Peter’s failure, that sin of denial. He

died for our failures, our sins as well. That's love! That's love lived out in perfect obedience to God for our sake.

Peter was tempted down the road of lying. It happened later that Thursday night, after Jesus was arrested. The conversations are recorded in Luke 22:54-62. "Then seizing him (Jesus), they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said. A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" Peter replied. About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the words the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly."

Confrontation this time was a mere look, oh but what a look. Many have speculated about the meaning behind that look, Scripture doesn't make it clear. I prefer to think that it was a look of love. In that brief moment, as Peter dared to exchange a glance, he may have finally seen Jesus' mission of the cross in 20/20 clarity. Maybe, what he once saw as a roadblock, he now saw as a wide-open super highway. It moved Peter to uncontrollable sobbing and a flood of tears, tears of both remorse for sin and joy for pardon. The message of the cross has always divided man's beliefs. The Apostle Paul said it best in 1st Corinthians 1:18. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

The message of the cross is a crossroad in and of itself. One road is to deny its purpose and go on living as one always has. Consequently, one denies any inherent evil within them and any need to be changed by what Jesus accomplished on the cross. The other road is to accept the message of the cross, admit one's guilt and receive the forgiveness Jesus offers by it. God calls this second road repentance. We provide for a time of repentance and forgiveness as part of our opening worship, to deal with sin and its interference to worship life.

We heard a lesson of repentance from history read earlier from the Old Testament book of Jonah. Some of you have heard the story of Jonah and the city of Nineveh. For those of you that have not, allow me to summarize. God sent a man named Jonah, a Jew, to preach repentance to the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and a very large city. Assyria was an enemy and constant war threat to Israel from the north. To say that Nineveh had become evil was probably an understatement. Finally, God had enough and was going to destroy them. He gave them one more chance, either listen to Jonah and repent, or die. Surprisingly, the king and the whole city of Nineveh listened to Jonah and God spared them, probably over 100,000 people. Even more amazing is that God pursues His enemies even in their unbelief. Paul affirmed this truth in 2nd Timothy 2:12-13. "If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us. If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself."

At this point, you might ask a very simple question. Why do I need to repent? I'm certainly not evil like the Ninevites. I don't think I'm such a bad person. Allow me to ask you two questions. Who's number one in your life, yourself or God? Ok be honest. If you say yourself, you've just broken God's First Commandment. Next question. Who are you going to take care of first, yourself or your neighbor? Yourself? You've broken God's Fifth

Commandment. Furthermore the Bible states in James 2:10 “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” Do you realize how futile our self-righteousness is? Do you realize how much you need Jesus?

Jesus is the master of confrontation. He lovingly confronts our self-centeredness and turns us to God-centeredness. Peter chose the road of repentance. Judas did not. The story doesn't end there. It's really only the beginning of Peter's ministry. You see during his time of repentance he remembered Jesus' words “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Jesus knew all along that Peter would accept forgiveness and forever take his proper place behind his Master and Lord. He did so knowing that it would lead him to a martyred death on a cross as well. After his resurrection, Jesus revealed this to Peter, recorded in John 21:18,19 “I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

How could he continue knowing what he would face? He couldn't! Not on his own. He placed all his trust in Jesus, the one who prayed for him, who died for his sins, secured his home in heaven and gave him strength for the road ahead. Peter went on to preach the great Pentecost sermon, performed miracles in Jesus' name and led the early Christian church to expand far beyond the Jerusalem walls. Church tradition records his martyrdom in Rome at the hand of Nero, after a nine-month imprisonment in total darkness, chained to a pillar in an upright position. But not before converting his jailers, Processus, Martinianus, and forty-seven others. He submitted to the Lordship of Jesus even at his death, crucified upside down on a cross.

Peter knew that his death brought nothing of his own merit, but he gained everything on the merits of Jesus, including eternal life in heaven. He wrote in 1 Peter 3:18 “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.”

Thankfully, none of us have had to make a life and death decision because of our faith. May not have even thought much about it. That may have been the way it was for Rachel Scott until April 20, 1999, a day at Columbine High School, this country will not soon forget. Rachel had to make a life or death decision for her faith and she chose faith over earthly death. She was murdered for that decision. In reading her story again, one comment especially drew my attention. Her father said that Rachel had a sense that her life would be short, and so everything she did was important to her.

That’s the way it was with Peter and the early Christian church. They had a strong sense that their time was short and Christ would return soon to judge the world. Listen to what Peter writes in his final letter, probably his last words to the church, recorded in 2 Peter 3:3-9. “First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the Day of Judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise,

as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

That sense of urgency that Rachel and the early Christians felt is rare these days. It may have gained attention as we witnessed thousands of people swept away in the recent Tsunami. Many of them perished without any hope of heaven. Some of the people in our sphere of influence will die without any hope of heaven. It's not a finger pointing statement, but a fact of life and it's meant to kindle our own sense of urgency. Dying doesn't have to end that way. Jesus wants everyone to be saved. Just like Peter with the jailers, we can make a difference no matter where we are. A witness only takes a few words or an act of service. God will get it done in mighty ways just as He did with the Ninevites. If there's something in our life getting in the way of that mission, then let's humble ourselves and ask Jesus to help us deal with it. Let's pray that Jesus would reveal His words of correction to us and move us to repentance. Remember his correction is a “good thing” and he does it because he loves us. By Jesus' constant prayers, he changes us now and for eternity. Jesus wants us to live with him in heaven. Jesus wants everyone we know to live with him too. Let me encourage you by closing with the words of Jesus from today's Gospel lesson, “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers”. Be confident, He's already planned your turning back and your strengthening of the brothers and sisters you meet. Live it out for the love of Jesus!