

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 14
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Crosses aren't comfortable, but they are crucial

From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised again.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "May you receive mercy, Lord! This will never happen to you."

²³ But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. ²⁵ In fact whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?"

—Matthew 16:21-26

We live comfortable lives, don't we? Just think about all the comforts that you have on a daily basis. You sit in your plush lazy boy chair, kick up your feet, recline. You don't have to get up to change the channel on your TV like I had to do when I was a kid. You simply grab the remote control and surf through hundreds of channels. We live a comfortable life.

Or you go on your phone and go to Amazon.com. You can make your grocery list online. You page through the groceries online and put them in your virtual cart. You pay for them. And then they deliver them to your doorstep. Oh, we live a comfortable life.

We have so many comforts in our lives, but I'm not so sure that is such a good thing. You can do all of your shopping, entertainment, social interactions simply from the comforts of your home. If you really wanted, you could live life without any real interactions with people outside your home. Right?

As human beings, we have a tendency to gravitate toward what is comfortable. We like our comforts. We don't like getting outside of our comfort zones. But I would venture to say that our desire for comforts may actually hinder our lives as Christians.

At least, that's what Jesus teaches us this morning. That's what Jesus taught Peter and the disciples. You see, there was a time in Peter's life when he was very comfortable. It was some pretty exciting times for Peter. He was convinced that Jesus was the guy. During the past few months of listening to Jesus' sermons and seeing Jesus' miracles, Peter was certain that Jesus was **"the Christ, the Son of the Living God."** He even made that confession as we heard last week.

Jesus was everything Peter hoped for. He was so excited. Finally, the Messiah had arrived. Finally, God was going to do some fantastic things. Finally, God was going to clean things up. And Peter couldn't wait to get started. He knew who Jesus was. And he boldly confessed that truth. He was comfortable being connected to Jesus the Messiah, the Christ.

I mean, this is Jesus. He is the one who commands the wind and the waves to sit, and they lower like an obedient dog. This is the guy who feeds thousands from some loaves of bread and a handful of fish. This is the guy who raises the dead and heals the sick. What power! What control! What a king!

"Jesus, you are the Christ! The Son of the Living God!" "You'll be sitting on your throne, and we will sit around you." Peter was comfortable.

But then Jesus started talking. He started saying things like: **I must go to Jerusalem.** (Yes, Jesus, we agree! Now's the time to go to the capital city.) **I must suffer many things at the hands of my enemies.** (Can you picture Peter's face scrunching up at this point?) Wait a second. What is Jesus talking about?

And then Jesus says, **"I must be killed."** Eyes wide open! Astonishment on the face. That's not how it is supposed to be. No. It doesn't work that way. Jesus, you can't set up a kingdom if you're dead. What are you talking about? No, Jesus, that's not part of my plan for you! This kind of talk makes me *uncomfortable*.

Peter actually pulls Jesus to the side and scolds him. **“May you receive mercy, Lord! This will never happen to you.”** Peter didn’t want Jesus to go to the City of Peace and Perish. He wanted him to go to the City of Peace and Prevail.

Executed like a condemned criminal on a cross? The man who can silence the seas? The Son of God who graced this world’s sod? “No. No, Jesus. Never! This shall never happen to you. I don’t want you to do that. I won’t let that happen to you. Let’s just go straight to the top. Let’s get the crown!”

As it turns out, that way of thinking was not only wrong, it was satanic! Jesus turns to Peter, **“Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men.”** The greatest enemy of the Son of God would have loved for Jesus to bypass the cross. Satan would have smiled with glee ... if Jesus the cross did flee.

So Jesus, looking Peter in the eyes and seeing Satan’s sadistic smile, says, “Peter, you have in mind human concerns. God’s plan? God’s plan is that I must go to Jerusalem. I must suffer. I must be killed!”

Jesus knew how necessary the cross was. He knew every slap and spit that waited for him there. He knew the jeering and sneering that was coming his way. He sensed the rejection of people and knew he must be rejected by God. The nail and the cross were waiting for him in Jerusalem. Not a crown. Not ease. Not comfort. But pain and agony and scorn. This was not comfortable for him. But it was necessary.

Jesus knew that it was necessary for him to embrace the cross because it was the only way to storm the gates of hell and rescue people who were destined to spend eternity there. Jesus knew that he needed to face the cross because it was the only way we could have peace with God.

Oh, don’t miss what happens at the cross of Christ. Yes, Jesus looks weak, but the cross of Christ is about power. And we love that, don’t we? We know that. We know that there is power in the cross. This is what we treasure. Ask any child in your Christian homes. How are we saved? They will tell you. Jesus died for my sins. We hang crosses in our homes and wear them around our necks because we treasure Christ’s cross so much.

But what about the other cross that Jesus talks about? Are we just as excited about that cross? Do we readily treasure that one? You know which one I’m talking about?

Jesus continued to teach his disciples, **“If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. In fact whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?”**

Peter, my disciples, you’re not just concerned about what kind of Messiah I am going to be. You are also concerned about what kind of follower you are going to be.

I’m pretty certain that none of us here would be willing to exchange our soul for the world. I don’t think we would be willing to sacrifice our soul in an eternity in hell for a life in this world of peace and security. Right? I’m certain of that.

You see, Peter didn’t want to give up his soul to the devil so that he could have an easy life here, but Peter did struggle with whether or not he wanted to give up his entire life to Jesus.

Do you ever struggle with that? Jesus wants us to live every single second of our lives for him. Every thought, every word, every deed – done for the glory of Jesus alone. That’s God’s way for our lives.

That’s a high calling, isn’t it? You and I live in a world that does not like to give too many things up. We like our schedules and our sports teams and our habits and our comforts. We like to have all the conveniences of what we want without any sacrifice. We feel entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, BUT we get to define what happiness is.

So there is a part of me that cringes when I hear Jesus says, **“If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”** That is a big commitment. If I am going to come after Jesus, if I am going to be his disciple, then I need to deny myself.

Just think about what that means. To deny something means to ignore it, to cast it aside. Well, what is it about ourselves that we need to deny? Anything and everything that goes contrary to what my God wants for my life. You see that? Jesus calls me to deny, to cast aside, to ignore anything and everything that goes contrary to what he wants for my life. He wants us to think **“the things of God, not the things of men.”**

Oh, this is hard. I have sinful nature that is daily crying for comforts in this life. I don’t want to put myself out there for the sake of someone else. I don’t want to take the time to learn about what God wants for me. I don’t want to

come to church to worship my God. I don't want to serve my neighbor. I don't want to be Jesus' ambassador. I want my happiness in my way. I want my comforts in my way.

That's what my sinful nature is constantly craving. And so is yours. Our sinful nature isn't something that we can just convert or make better. It is a part of me that needs to be killed... daily. That's where the cross comes in our lives.

That's why Jesus said he *had* go to Jerusalem; he *had* to suffer; he *had* to be killed. The cross was necessary for our salvation.

But brothers and sisters, notice that there is another necessity. Jesus said, "**I *have* to be raised again.**" Jesus lives. He is the Living Son of the Living God.

And he stands before us today and says, "You know the times when you were self-absorbed and afraid to be fully committed to me, I forgive those times. I was fully committed to you. That's why I didn't let Satan or Satan's mouthpiece stand in my way of shedding my blood as payment for you."

The living Jesus stands before us today and says, "You know all the times that you were afraid to give your soul completely to me because you thought that you would get something better by holding on to it? I willingly gave my entire life for you so that I could hold you in my loving hands."

The living Jesus stands before us today and says, "My child, stop looking at the worthless things of this life. I have a crown in store for you. It's right here. In my hand. And it has your name on it. Don't focus on the worthless things of this world. Focus on what is in store for you. Focus on what I am keeping for you. I promise. I will strengthen you to bear up under whatever crosses you have as my followers."

Yes, a cross is heavy. Yes, a cross is painful. But those crosses in our lives are blessings. Because as we carry those crosses through life, they are an ever-present reminder that we are strangers in this world and that heaven is our home. Those crosses are intended to prevent us from becoming comfortable in this world; they are intended to keep us focused on why we are still in this world. We are here to glorify God and to serve others. So, we deny ourselves to do that. **Crosses aren't comfortable, but they are crucial.** Amen.