

From That Time on: Preparedness for Change (Matthew 16:21–28)

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Some moments in life change everything. We may hear a diagnosis, receive a phone call, lose someone we love, begin a new ministry, or discover that what we thought was true is no longer enough. Matthew tells us that such a moment came for Jesus and his disciples: “From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples...”

That phrase, “from that time on,” marks a turning point. Peter has just confessed, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus calls him blessed and says the church will be built on that confession. Peter has even been given the “keys of the kingdom.” But immediately after that great confession, Jesus begins to teach something Peter does not want to hear: “He must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering... and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Peter has confessed the right Christ—but he has not yet understood the way of Christ. So what changes “from that time on”?

1. Jesus changes the disciples’ understanding of the Messiah

Matthew says Jesus “began to show” them. Jesus does not merely give them another theological statement. He begins to show them, through his own life and eventually through his own body, what kind of Messiah he is.

Peter has a Messiah in his mind—but Peter’s Messiah has no cross. Peter expects victory, restoration, power, and triumph. Jesus speaks instead of Jerusalem, suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection.

That is the great difference: Peter conceives of a Messiah without the cross.

Jesus reveals a Messiah with the cross. Peter cannot imagine that suffering could belong to the mission of God’s Messiah. We, too, can be confident in our claims about God—and

sometimes even more confident in our claims on God's behalf. We can decide what God should do, how God should act, and what God's Messiah ought to look like. But Jesus refuses to fit Peter's script. And when Peter says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you," Jesus responds with extraordinary severity: "Get behind me, Satan!" The same Peter who was called "blessed" now becomes a "stumbling block." The rock has become a stumbling block because he is trying to put his will above God's will.

2. Peter must change his idea of what faithfulness means

Peter's mistake is not that he does not love Jesus. He objects precisely because he loves Jesus. But love can become confused with control. Peter is saying, in effect, "Jesus, I know what is best for you." That is the temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness in Matthew 4: to choose another way than the way of the cross. Now the same temptation comes through Peter. The temptation is not simply to do evil. The temptation is to impose our will on God's. Peter has just received the authority to bind and to loose. Now, almost ironically, he tries to bind Jesus—to prevent Jesus from following the mission God has given him. That is why Jesus rebukes him. Faith is not giving God our conditions. Faith is allowing God to change our conditions. Peter must move from saying, "This is what I think God should do," to asking, "What is God doing, and am I willing to follow?" That is a change every disciple must make.

3. The church must change from protecting itself to following Christ

Throughout history, the church has sometimes protected its institutions, traditions, doctrines, reputations, and boundaries more fiercely than it has followed Jesus. We sometimes want a pure, protected, secure church. But Jesus did not remain safely outside humanity's mess.

God entered our world in Jesus. He became vulnerable. He entered a world of rejection, suffering, injustice, shame, and death. He did not save the world by avoiding its brokenness.

Therefore, the church cannot be the body of Christ while refusing to become vulnerable for others. The church must continually return to Christ. As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of coming together of two different denominations, the Presbyterian and the United Methodist, I thankfully remember those who worked hard to unite the church not primarily to become more impressive, not simply to become more powerful and establish one's supremacy over the other, not merely to protect the glory of their past histories, doctrines, theologies, and traditions, but to become more faithful to the way of Jesus. The question, therefore, is not, "How do we preserve the church?" The question is, "How do we faithfully follow Jesus into the world?"

4. We discover what "life" really means when we are willing to lose it

Jesus now turns from his own cross to ours: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," and then comes one of the great paradoxes of the Gospel: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." The Greek word for "life" is *psychē*—a word that can mean soul, or the self. Jesus is not telling us to despise our biological life. Our instinct to protect our bodies and minds when they are threatened is a gift of nature. We are created to preserve life. The problem begins when self-preservation becomes life's highest purpose. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus famously distinguished between what is within our control and what is not. Wisdom begins by recognizing that we cannot control everything around us. Jesus takes us even deeper. There is a kind of life that we can spend our entire existence trying to protect—and in protecting it, we can actually lose our soul. We can protect our reputation and lose our integrity, our comfort and lose our compassion, our security and lose our calling, the institution and lose the mission, and protect ourselves from every wound—and never become fully available to love. Therefore, to receive the life of Christ, we must be willing to release the life that our souls are desperately trying to control.

5. Taking up the cross means following Jesus into costly love

It does not mean that we should go looking for suffering. It means that when faithfulness brings suffering, hardship, shame, belittling, disdain, scorn, or lowliness, we do not abandon the way of Christ. The cross is not suffering for suffering's sake. Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* uses the old legend of a bird that sings only once in its life, seeking out a thorn and giving itself to the pain as it sings its most beautiful song. The image is powerful, even though the story is a literary legend rather than a teaching about Christian discipleship. Our lives, too, may have many thorns. But Jesus does not promise a life without thorns. He promises that losing our life for his sake is not the end of life. The disciples did not understand this immediately, but later they understood that the cross is not the final word. Resurrection is.

So, "from that time on," Jesus prepares his disciples for change. He changes their understanding of the Messiah. Peter must change his understanding of faithfulness. The church must continually change by returning to Christ's way. We must change our understanding of what it means to possess life. And finally, we must change our understanding of the cross. To take up the cross is to say: I will not control God. I will not make self-preservation my highest goal. I will follow Jesus, even when following him costs me something. There may be thorns along the way. But with every thorn we encounter in faithful discipleship, may we trust that Christ is leading us—not toward death, but toward life in him. When we take up the cross, we do not merely endure suffering; we follow Christ into the life he promises. Amen.