

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA *June 26, 2022*

Unrelenting, Urgent Truth

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are numerous times in scripture when I really, **really** wish Jesus would be better about sugar coating the Truth. This passage in particular could really use something to make the Truth of the Way of Christ more palatable. I count at least four bitter pills for followers of the Way in this short narrative.

The first bitter pill that Jesus shares is directed at James and John. When Jesus and his disciples are refused entry into a Samaritan village those two want revenge. They want to call down fire upon these people who refuse to offer basic hospitality (an echo of Sodom's fate). But Jesus is having none of it and he rebukes them. The Way of Christ has no room for vengeance or retribution.

The next three bitter pills are directed at would-be followers of Christ's Way. These teachings also express a new sense of urgency from Jesus. One could almost describe Jesus' words as curt or terse. Gone is the patient Jesus who looked on the hungry crowds with compassion, instead we see a Jesus who is clearly on a mission.

These verses are the opening of what's known as Jesus' travel narrative in Luke. At this point in his ministry he has "set his face towards Jerusalem"¹ and is preaching and teaching as he makes his way to the cross. And perhaps that's part of the reason Jesus isn't wasting time with trying to make what he has to say easier for people to hear. He knows where his journey is taking him and his message seems to take on a new sense of urgency here as he begins his intentional and resolute journey to his death.

Given this end goal, it should be no surprise that Jesus is uninterested in excuses. He warns these would-be followers that his Way claims primacy on

¹ Luke 9:51b (NRSV)

people. To follow Jesus means letting go of a lot of other priorities. These pills were bitter then, they remain bitter today.

Following the Way of Christ means understanding that God is the source of “daily bread” and all that we need. It means placing things like comfort far lower as a priority in comparison to the Way. It means relying upon community and relationship while we journey through life.

Following the Way of Christ means having a different understanding of family. It means letting “the dead bury their own dead”² as followers of the Way pursue life by giving it up.³ It means proclaiming the Gospel even when it’s hard to, even in the face of personal loss and grief.

Following the Way of Christ means keeping our eyes on the end goal of the Way, the kingdom of God. It means not letting other messages and priorities distract us from a single-minded pursuit of that goal. It means letting go of the past and opening our eyes to the presence and call of God in the here-and-now.

These are hard and bitter pills to swallow! Each one of these four bitter pills is almost an attack on basic human priorities and desires. The Way of Christ is more important than vengeance and ego, it’s more important than worrying about necessities, it’s more important than social, and even filial, obligations! It’s almost as though Christ is laying the groundwork for the prayer he will teach in just a couple of chapters, “**your** kingdom come, **your** will be done.”⁴ Such focus on a will not our own is anathema to humanity. In my experience, our “bondage to sin” is almost entirely due to our placing our wills as paramount over God’s will...paramount over God’s desires for all of humanity, and all of creation. We could just as easily confess that we are in bondage to our selves, in bondage to vengeance, comfort, culture, and customs.

Jesus wants his followers to drop everything for the sake of the Way, for the sake of the Gospel...everything! Jesus is telling those who would follow that the Way is not easy, and it means giving up much of what the world tells us is important. Luke is, once again, showing the truth of Mary’s words in the Magnificat, the proud will be scattered, the mighty brought down, and the rich sent away empty.⁵ Pride, might, and riches are all inconsequential to the

² Luke 9:60b (NRSV)

³ Matthew 16:25 (NRSV)

⁴ Luke 11:2; Matthew 6:10 (NRSV)

⁵ Luke 1:51b, 52a, 53b (NRSV)

Way. More than inconsequential, they are stumbling blocks and diversions from the Way. They are some of the ways in which we bind ourselves in sin. Some of the underlying values that lead to our excuse-making and refusal to live as God would have us live.

Jesus is confronting all who would walk his Way with Truth. Truth about who we are, who we have been made to be, and the drastic difference between those realities. Jesus is speaking Truth in love, urgent, unrelenting Truth. All of the other ways we pursue lead to sin and death. The Way of Christ, the Way of Truth, is the only Way to life. And not just life, but life as we were made to live it, in bondage not to sin, but to God and to one another. Bound up together in the communal reality of God.

So, who here is ready to walk this Way? Who's willing to really commit to this life that Jesus calls us to? Who here is ready to give things up? Things like power and wealth, pride and customs. Who here is ready to completely rearrange their priorities in order to align themselves with God's priorities? Anyone? Are you sure? The Way of Christ is not easy...as a matter of fact it feels like death to us, especially to our egos! Are you 100% certain this is the Way for you?

I sometimes wonder why anyone on earth would want to follow the Way of Christ. It is so hard and demands so much from us. And yet, the Way has persisted for over two thousand years. People have done their best to muddle along it for just as long. Why? What is so compelling about this bitter, difficult, self-sacrificing Way?

Ultimately, this Way is what we have been made for, and that is why it persists despite how difficult and bitter it feels. It persists because when we can let go, even if only briefly, of our own desires and priorities, we can experience profound connection, profound love, and profound wisdom. The Way persists because deep down, we know we need it. Deep down we know just how broken the world is...how broken we are. Deep down we know the urgent, unrelenting Truth, we need to be transformed, our world needs to be transformed.

Jesus doesn't sugar coat the Truth of his Way, he knows that we're all too good at enjoying the coating and leaving the core behind. We're all too good at getting distracted by power and wealth, by our judgements of others, by all sorts of evil and sinful things. We need to be brought up short. We need to be confronted with our brokenness. We need a mirror placed in front of us.

We need to have our eyes opened to the Truth, unvarnished and whole, the Truth that life is only lived if we give it away to God and neighbor. The unrelenting and urgent Truth that our customs and culture, our nationality, our race, our racism, our neo-Imperialism, our ideologies, our politics, our judgements, our prejudices, our transphobia, our comfort, our wealth, our privilege, our hatred and violence are not, and never will be, the Way of Christ. Rather, the Way of Christ, the Way we were made for, is concentrated on love and mercy, welcome and grace.

Christ is unrelentingly headed to the cross with an urgency born out love. This is a part of the Way for us too. We are headed to the cross too...we are headed to a reality in which self-sacrificial love binds us to one another and binds us to God. We are on the Way...a hard and difficult Way...but a Way, the only Way, that leads to the life that we were made for, the life that is true life.

Amen.