

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, September 6, 2026

Friends, we are gathered together. Let us take a moment to center ourselves and to prepare to hear the words of our Lord.

Let us pray.

Mighty and merciful God, your voice speaks to us across the centuries, calling us to follow you. This morning, open our hearts and our minds that we may hear your word read and proclaimed. And having heard it, we might be sent out into the world as changed people, strengthened once again to do the work of your kingdom. Amen.

We have finished up our summer sermon series, and we are on the cusp of a fall September sermon series. And so this Sunday we are reverting to the Revised Common Lectionary. So we find ourselves in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16, verses 21- 28. Hear these words of the early church.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day raised. And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you." But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world, but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his father, and he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Our text this morning follows directly after another powerful moment between Jesus and his disciples. In that previous text, Jesus asked his gathered friends, who did they say that he was? And Peter is right there, Johnny on the spot with the answer. "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Jesus blesses Peter and promises to build the future around him. In fact, saying, "On this rock, I will build my church." But today we find Peter and Jesus a little more at odds with each other. They are at conflict about what it means to claim the mantle of Messiah. I'm sure that you have heard this before, but according to Jewish expectations, the Messiah would come to destroy Israel's enemies. The Messiah would restore the kingdom of Israel, usher in an age of peace. So if Jesus really was the Messiah, you see there was a lot in it for Peter, his right-hand man. But then Jesus begins to explain and Peter's vision looked a little shaky. The more Jesus talks, the more Peter rightly hears, "I am the Messiah, but I'm not the kind of

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Messiah you imagine. I will suffer many things. I will be rejected by the authorities. I will die." And confronted with a vision that was contrary to his own, Peter began to rebuke Jesus. This always surprises me in the text. It's hard to believe that that's a strong word that we let slip past us. Peter began to rebuke Jesus. It's not like Peter raised his hand and timidly asked a question. He pulled Jesus to the side and began to redirect him the way a teacher would redirect a child, to take him aside and explain things to him. Peter was ready to correct Jesus's vision. But that's not what happened. Jesus spoke with his full authority to Peter. "Get behind me, Satan." Our text shows us that Peter had everything backwards. He believed the Messiah was called to his own hopes and dreams. And that always gives me pause because through the course of my life, I have heard all kinds of proclamations of what the Christian faith can give me. All kinds of proclamations that emphasize exactly what Peter emphasized. What's in it for me? My vision, my dreams, my hopes. There are voices that say, "If I believe in Jesus, I'll experience a renewed sense of my own personhood." Or that if I believe in Jesus, all my physical ailments will be healed. Or if I believe in Jesus, all of my enemies will be ground into the dust. If I believe in Jesus, all of my financial needs will be met. We have all heard these promises and many many more pointing that we have everything to gain and nothing to cost us by following God. But this passage in Matthew tells us clearly Jesus rejected this self centered version of Christianity. Jesus rejected Peter's interpretation of the Messiah. He rejected the interpretation that the priests and the Pharisees had. And Jesus will reject any such notions of Christianity that dance in our head that center us and our desires alone. Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan." And it's not just a throwaway line because this is exactly how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. Command these stones to become loaves of bread. Throw yourself down from the temple and watch the angels bear you up. Fall down and worship me and all the kingdoms of the world and their glory will be yours. The tempter is standing there saying to Jesus, look what can be in it for you. And through Peter's words in our passage, that old voice of temptation came to Jesus again. You don't have to suffer, says Peter. You can have it all. And Jesus says strongly, "Get behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." And then Jesus proceeds to lay out for the disciples what's in it for them. Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." What's in it for me? Jesus responds, "Whoever will save his life will lose it, and whoever will lose his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospels will find it." Those are frankly not comforting words for the disciples or for us necessarily to hear today. Those are words of challenge. Those are words that are designed to shake us to our core. And whatever threat posed by an idea of a prosperity gospel, an even more insidious assumption lurks among us deep down inside because we're human—the idea that God primarily or only wants us to be happy. We sing so many songs that talk about how much Jesus loves us and how much we love Jesus and how great God is. Self-help books pack the inventories of bookstores. This happiness assumption has sunk so deep into our collective psyche that we need the words, the strong words of Jesus to challenge it. Because we need to hear again that God might call us to radical sacrifice. God may call us to danger as Americans. Frankly, we have been conditioned day in and day out from the time we could begin recognizing the world around us to ask the

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same question that Peter did when faced with any choice, challenge, or opportunity. What's in it for me? This myth of American individualism sits strong with us. And we are, when we sit there, we are faced with a temptation similar to that which Jesus faced. We hear disparate voices. one that promises following Jesus or even making a public declaration of faith will bring an end of all of the things that bother us and bring us happiness and peace forever more. We have a voice that promises a crossless version of the Christian faith where all of our needs are met right now.

And so today when we hear the other voice, the voice of Jesus calling us to take up the cross, the voice of Jesus calling us to suffer for the sake of the gospel and for other people, and each and every day and each and every Sunday, we gather here and we wrestle with which voice we will heed. And we're not going to get it perfect. We're not going to have it right every time. But it's why we gather to hear the words again and again to remind ourselves that we are to think beyond ourselves and to not take the easy path that promises immediate rewards.

While I was writing this sermon, a story I had heard came to mind about this idea of taking up our cross while also living joyfully, because they don't have to be mutually exclusive. In early 1961, a group of young men and young women of the Nashville student movement decided to reinforce the freedom rides. The two previous bus loads had encountered severe beatings and firebombs. And these students of the Nashville student movement determined along with others from across the United States that they were not going to let the freedom ride movement die. Now, no one could deny that these students experienced joy through the time that they had together, through their trials and tribulations that they went through. In fact, Bull Connor would complain that he just couldn't stand the sound of their singing every time he arrested them. But the students were also fully mindful of the potential cost as well. The night before they left Nashville, each one of them signed their last will and testament. So this juxtaposition of singing hymns and signing one's will is exactly what Jesus is talking about. What it means to take up our cross and follow.

And as I said earlier, we are human beings and we are always sorely tempted to put our own needs above everything else. But when we do that, we deny the very ground of our creation. Jesus underscored this reality when he tells us about the greatest commandment of all, which is to love your God and to love your neighbor. I often joke that every single sermon I ever have or ever will preach boils down to those two things. Loving God and loving our neighbor. We were not created for ourselves. We were created for life among others.

I'm drawn back to that first verb in our passage where Jesus began to show the disciples what would happen next. Show, not tell, not teach. And that has sat with me because I think it makes a difference if we're told we can forget Jerusalem. I don't remember anybody saying anything about Jerusalem or if we are taught we can misunderstand.

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You want us to suffer and die. Oh wait, this is a parable, right? We're talking metaphorically. Sure, Jesus Christ, we're with you. But when Jesus shows us, well, that's different. When we're shown, we have to look and then we are forced to see. And for the rest of his time on earth, Jesus showed his disciples and showed us through our scriptures what is divine in the world. Jesus spent his time healing, transforming, telling stories, breaking bread, lifting up and confronting empire and power. And he also shows us what is human in the world. Oppression, marginalization, ethnocentrism, and even ultimately crucifixion.

Comparing those two things, friends, we are tempted to settle for this crossless version of obedience to God's will. To find a path that gives us everything without demanding anything in return. Yet once again, God turns our questions and our expectations right upside down. Because despite what the world says, it is indeed in giving that we receive. Despite what the world says, it is in losing that we win. Despite what the world says, it's in dying that we are born to eternal life. And so, friends, we take up our cross. We give our lives away as we walk the path of Jesus. And we get to see a foretaste of the kingdom of God. We are investing each and every day in a future that we may not see. Planting seeds of hope and promise for ourselves and for the world. And that, my friends, is what's in it for us. May it be so this day and every day. Amen.