

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button
Occasion: 12 Pentecost
Date: August 31, 2014
Theme: "Where's the Uplift?"
Text: Matthew 16: 21-28

NRS Matthew 16

²¹ 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 be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³ But he 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." ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ 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? ²⁷ "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ 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."

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

May the blessing of the Lord rest and remain upon you always for the sake of Jesus the Messiah. **Amen.**

It was over 30 years ago, but I remember it like yesterday. Our church was set to host that year's Empty Stocking Appeal. As Christmas approached, the churches of our community would gather gifts and toys for the children of some of our less-advantaged families.



We'd start right after Thanksgiving, and a couple of weeks before Christmas we'd gather up all the gifts and invite the families to come for the distribution. For the kids we'd have Santa arrive in one of our local police cruisers, and with lights flashing and sirens blaring he would ho-ho-ho his way to the front of the room where we'd start handing out the gifts.

That year our church had an intern, a big strapping farm boy from Minnesota named Jon Anderson. (He's now the bishop of the Southwest Minnesota Synod of the ELCA.)

He'd played football at St. Olaf College, and given his height, size, and good nature, we all thought he'd be a great Santa. The day of the big distribution, while Jon was getting fitted for his Santa suit, we began piling up the gifts and toys at the far end of the

Fellowship Hall and decking out the place to look all festive and Christmasy. The gift-giving was scheduled for 7 p.m. that evening, but when I got there at 6:30 p.m. there were already a lot of people in the room. By 7 p.m. the hall was packed, and when Santa made his dramatic entrance, things got a little dicey. Pandemonium is, I think, too strong a word, but let's just say that there was a rush of people toward where I and some other church volunteers were manning the gift tables. Even before he could take a seat, Santa was awash in kids,



and at one point I heard Jon crying out, "Santa can't breathe! Santa can't breathe!" Meanwhile, moms and dads and grandmas and grandpas were pressing in on the gift tables, and sometimes reaching over the gift tables, for the pretty packages that would fill their empty stockings. As Santa's helpers, we were each wearing one of those tasseled, elf caps, you know what I mean? So within a couple of minutes, we were all sweating buckshot and barking out things like, "One at a time. Hands behind the table. Single file, single file!" And my favorite, "Haven't you already been through this line once before?"



Forty-five minutes later it was all over but the shouting. Santa looked like he'd been trampled by the munchkin parade. The rest of us were mostly sopping wet and trying to catch our breath before having to take down the tables and pick up the wrapping paper that was now strewn from one end of the room to the other.



And that's when one of our church volunteers approached me. She was a new member, and by new, I mean she was pretty much new to the whole Christian faith. We were putting up some chairs when she said to me, very seriously, "Somehow, I thought this would be more uplifting."

The moment those words came out of her mouth, I immediately knew two things. One, I knew there had to be a better way to do the Empty Stocking Appeal. And two, I knew exactly what I wanted inscribed on my tombstone: "Somehow, I thought this would be more uplifting."

Maybe you've had this experience, too. You want to do some good, say, for your family, or church, or community.



Maybe you go to school for a career that will serve other people, or maybe you sign up on a committee or join an organization that is attempting to address a pressing social need. You get all enthused and pumped up about making a difference, but either little by little or all of sudden, you find yourself hip-deep in a whole lot of work, or a whole lot of hassle, or a whole lot of work and hassle,

and you're thinking, "What have I gotten myself into? Why are these people yelling at me? Can't they see that I'm doing my best? Doesn't anybody here appreciate my sacrifice?" And at the end of the day, week, month, year, or however long you manage to hang in there, you're saying to your pastor or your boss or your colleague, "Somehow, I thought this would be more uplifting."

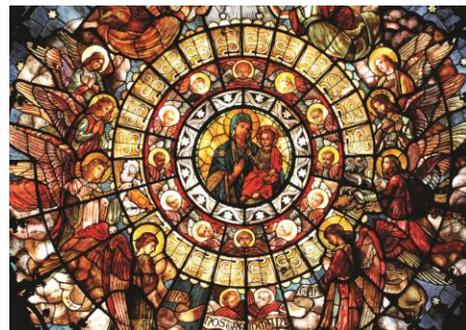


I have no direct access to the psychology of the Apostle Peter, but I strongly suspect that similar thoughts were running through his mind the day Jesus began to show him and his fellow disciples "that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Again, I can't know for sure what Peter was thinking when he and his brother Andrew first answered Jesus' call to become fishers of men. Maybe he thought that they'd be the restorers of Israel. Or maybe he thought they'd be hailed as great liberators and heroes of the faith. Or maybe he just thought that he was getting a free ticket out of

Capernaum and the promise that maybe he'd never have to clean another fish for the rest of his life. But I'm fairly certain that he wasn't bargaining on great suffering and a criminal's death for the man he'd just confessed the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. My guess is that Peter was looking for something, well, a little more "uplifting."

We shouldn't be too hard on Peter. At that point in Jewish history there were a lot of competing ideas on who or what the Messiah was supposed to be.

The word Messiah, or in Greek Christ, means anointed, which is to say, God would anoint this person for a special purpose in God's divine plan. Some read Scripture as predicting that the Messiah would be a prophet announcing the coming of a new age, like Elijah. Others insisted that the Messiah would be king over a restored Israel, like David.



Many hoped that the Messiah would be a warrior to expel the Romans from the Promised Land and exact God's vengeance on the persecutors and oppressors of God's people, maybe like Joshua of old. Of course, it's also true that many years before Isaiah had prophesied a suffering servant who would bear the sins of many and heal us by his wounds.



But that hadn't exactly made the Top Ten of



Israel's expectations for the Messiah. They were looking for a Christ who would make them proud, and Peter, too, I'm sure was hoping for a leader who would lift him up, shower him with blessings, and make him feel good about himself. And who wouldn't?



We all want the thrill of victory without the agony of defeat. We all want the crown without the cross.

We all want the uplift without the downside. It's human nature, and yet Jesus set his face to Jerusalem and subjected himself to great suffering and shameful death in large measure to change that



nature. There's some part of my heart that always wants everything to be about me, me, me, but Jesus goes to the cross precisely to break open that selfish heart to make room in me and in you to include people we might otherwise shun, neglect, or just ignore.

Redemption means not only that I'll go to heaven when I die, but also while I live, I have been freed from sin and my own turned in nature to follow Jesus and take up my cross and give of myself, however imperfectly.

So long as I live in what St. Paul calls "this body of death," I'll be expecting God to pat me on the back and the world to applaud my every noble thought, word, or deed. But as I once heard Pastor Rob Bell say, "Jesus loves us exactly as we are, and yet he loves us way too much to let us stay that way."