

June 26, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

No Matter What, Do Not let Go of Jesus!

Each of you made a commitment to get here this morning. You probably set an alarm clock to wake up instead of sleeping in. You drove here, using your precious gasoline supply. You took time out of your busy schedules. You will, most likely, give an offering of some of your hard-earned money. Being a Christian requires a certain level of commitment. More commitment is required from some than others. Recent reports from North Korea tell us that hundreds of Christians from age 3 to over 80 years old were arrested and punished for talking about Jesus. One Christian was executed in front of a firing squad for being in possession of a Bible. Last Tuesday, June 21, 10 Christians were killed by an Islamic extremist group in the Democrat Republic of the Congo, in the middle of Africa. Being a Christian is not a cake walk. Often, it involves pain and sacrifice. Jesus told us that we would have to carry a cross when we follow him, not a soft pillow. This morning, we are encouraged, “No matter what, do not let go of Jesus.”

The Apostle Paul understood what it meant to follow Jesus. Here’s the setting for 2 Corinthians 11. Paul started the church in the city of Corinth. He told people that Jesus was true God in the flesh who died for the sins of the whole world and rose to give us eternal life in heaven. After a year and half of mission work, there was an established Christian congregation in Corinth. When Paul then moved on to other cities to tell others about Jesus, some false prophets moved into Corinth. They talked about Jesus, but they were more like carnival showmen trying to take people’s money than true preachers. I would compare them to most of the TV evangelists of our time who put on a show and then ask for your money. The false prophets in Corinth claimed to be some sort of “super-apostles” who were better than Paul. They were focusing people on themselves instead of Jesus. Yikes! The gospel was in danger.

Paul wrote an impassioned letter begging the people to focus on the message of salvation through Jesus alone that Paul shared with them. Since the members of that young church in Corinth had been impressed with the resume’ of the false teachers, then Paul would have to show them his resume’. Paul did not want to draw attention to himself, but he had to prove to the people that he was worth listening to. To summarize verse 21-30, Paul said that he was just as Jewish as the false teachers and that he had done more for Jesus than they did. Paul was not in it for the money. He worked for free. **“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ... ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food.”** If the people were looking at resume’s, Paul was their man. They should listen to the message of salvation he shared with them.

As Paul suffered so much for the cause of Christ, it would have been easy for him to give up on Jesus, thinking “Jesus, this is no fun. I’m suffering. You are not helping me. What the use?” Instead, God granted Paul the strength to keep hanging on to Jesus. Even in the face of a host of dangers and hardships he did not look back. I am not Paul. Neither are you. We have not had to suffer anything close to what Paul endured. In some places, the Devil uses hardship to turn people away from Jesus, like in North Korea and the Democrat Republic of the Congo. Here in America, the Devil ironically uses our freedom of religion to trip us up. You will not be arrested for having a Bible or coming to church. So, we relax and do not hold on to Jesus as tightly as we should. When there is no sacrifice for our faith, our faith does not mean too much to us.

Our sinful, selfish natures would very much like a religion of convenience. “I’ll go to church when it’s convenient. I do not want to sacrifice any time to help maintain the church’s ministry. Others can do that. I’ll give on offering to the church after I buy everything I want.” Someone asked, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Does your lifestyle and language reflect the fact that you are connected to Christ? For our many sins and our lukewarm, lackadaisical commitment to Christ, we could expect God to give up on us. How long does a baseball manager work with a player who doesn’t try his best and give his all? How long should God put up with us for not being fully committed to him? We would expect God to give up on us and let us spend eternity apart from him.

Next week, we will celebrate the 4th of July as we give thanks for the many blessings God has given us here in America. Dedicated patriots gave themselves completely to the cause of independence and won the Revolutionary War. Near the end of the war, the British took control of the city of Yorktown, VA. The British General Cornwallis took over the large home of Thomas Nelson for his headquarters. Thomas Nelson was one of the men who signed our Declaration of Independence on July 4th. Five years after that, Thomas was serving as an officer with General George Washington. When the American forces surrounded Yorktown to attack, Thomas Nelson quietly told General George Washington to open fire on his own house. As you know, the British were defeated at Yorktown and the Americans won the war. Thomas Nelson, however, was homeless and died bankrupt.

Thomas Nelson was willing to sacrifice his own home to win the war for freedom. God was willing to sacrifice his own son to win freedom for your soul. For our many sins, we could expect God give up ON us. Instead, God gave up FOR us. He gave up his son for us. Jesus willingly gave up his life for you. He was willing, even eager, to stay on the cross and get hit with God’s righteous anger over your sins and mine. Our sins were blamed on Jesus as he hung on the cross and he suffered what we deserved. Then Jesus announced, “It is finished.” Your sins are forgiven. Jesus gave himself up for you! Salvation is complete. Even though we know that we are sinful through and through, God declares you to be perfect and pure and prepared for paradise.

The devil has always done all he could to separate believers from Jesus. At the time of the Apostle Paul, the devil used the Roman government to arrest Christians, confiscate their property, burn them at the stake and feed them live to hungry lions. But the believers did not let go of Jesus. The gates of hell could not prevail against God's kingdom. No matter what difficulty they faced, the Lord used his Word to strengthen them so they did not let go of Jesus. Walking with Jesus, means walking away from the ways of the world, sometimes leaving behind our treasures and pleasures, sometimes friends and relatives. Sometimes, walking with Jesus means that it's going to hurt.

In this morning's gospel lesson from Luke 9, we hear that the people in a Samaritan village did not welcome Jesus and his disciples. James and John were so angry that they wanted God to zap them with lightning and destroy them. Jesus used their bad attitude to teach an important lesson about what it means to follow Jesus, to be a Christian. Being a Christian means that some people are going to reject us. There have been times when I gently and lovingly shared the truth of God's Word with people and they quickly asked me to leave their house. There have been times when Satan wiggled his way into the hearts of some of our members so that they said cruel and harsh things about me and "the WELS" as they left our church. Yes, it hurts. You, you lose sleep over it. But every time I complain Jesus tells me (Mt 10:24), "The student is not above his teacher." If Jesus, the teacher was persecuted, then we, his students, can expect persecution.

In Luke 9, when a man told Jesus that he wanted to follow him, Jesus explained that following him would not be an easy life for him. When Jesus called other fellows to follow him but they hesitated. Through their example, Jesus is teaching us that being connected to him is even more important than being connected to our earthly relatives. Jesus replied (:62), "**No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.**" A farmer who looks backwards when plowing, is going to make a mess of his field. Following Jesus requires a total commitment, not a divided heart that keeps looking back at the treasures and pleasures we may have left behind. Jesus is not interested in half-hearted followers who treat him like a hobby – something we enjoy when it's convenient. Service in God's kingdom means following Jesus in faith no matter what.

If following Jesus means losing our tax-exempt status as a church, so be it. If it means paying a penalty for teaching what the Bible says about gender and abortion and marriage, so be it. If it means having loved ones turn against us for saying that Jesus is the only way to heaven, so be it. If it means that the pastor is thrown in prison for the so-called "hate crime" of calling sin a sin, so be it. If it means being executed for having a Bible, so be it. None of us knows what exactly is going to happen in our rapidly changing culture, but we do know that there will continue to be opposition to the gospel. So be it. As we sing in one of our hymns (CW 863, st. 4), "And take they [enemies of the gospel] our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, though all may be gone, our victory is won; the kingdom's ours forever." Satan is trying to

figure out what he can take away from you so that you get so discouraged that you let go of Jesus. By ourselves, we would easily be overwhelmed and let go of Jesus. By the strength that God gives us through Word and Sacrament, though, we are willing to leave everything else behind if that is what we need to do to keep hanging on to Jesus. God did not promise us a heaven ON earth, but a heaven AFTER earth. Will things on this earth be painful and difficult? Jesus said they would. When everything is said and done, though, we'll still be hanging on to Jesus.

Recently, I have been especially fascinated with the story of Noah and the Ark and been studying it more closely. There is no way that Noah and his three young sons could build the huge ark by themselves. Certainly, Noah hired others to cut down a forest of trees and put the pieces together. I like to imagine that a lumberjack told Noah, "I'll cut those trees down for you if you give me 100 acres of your farmland." And Noah said, "Sure." Or, a carpenter may have told Noah, "I'll build an ark for you if you give 1000 sheep." And Noah said, "Sure." For decades, that lumberjack and carpenter enjoyed their crops and their flocks. Maybe Noah gave other workers gold and silver which made them rich for a few decades. But you know what finally happened. The flood came and destroyed those crops and flocks and anything that gold or silver could buy. Noah was willing to let go of his crops and flocks and gold and silver because he knew that everything in this world was going to be destroyed. He had his eye on a better place as he hung onto the LORD as his Savior.

God has promised you the same grace he gave Noah to view the things of this world as temporary. Sure, we're going to work hard and be careful with our money and plan for the future. Sure, we're going to be kind and loving to our relatives and neighbors. We're going to read our Bibles and support the gospel ministry. We're going to do what we can to tell people about Jesus and what he did for us. We're going to do what God puts in front of us to do each day. It is not wrong to enjoy the gifts God has given you and be happy. We're going to give thanks to God for the amazing blessings – both physical and spiritual – that we enjoy. But we are not going to let the things of this world or any threat of persecution or pain pull us away from Jesus. Jesus gave his all for you. This morning, through the message of God's saving love the Holy Spirit strengthened your commitment and resolve so that, you will not let go of Jesus, no matter what. Amen.

words of Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius was an early Christian, so early that he learned about Jesus under the apostle John. May his prayer be our prayer as we face suffering.

Prayer:

"Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ. Amen."