

The Rev'd R. Kevin Kelly | Sermon | The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost A

When it comes to the disciples' mission,  
no one could ever accuse Jesus,  
of pulling some kind of bait and switch.

If they hated me, which they do, he said,  
can you imagine how much more,  
they're going to hate you?

I haven't come to bring peace -  
at least not what everyone thinks peace is -  
but a sword.

And this message,  
will turn whole families and households  
against one another.

It's not the best recruitment speech.  
I mean,  
if you're trying to get people on board,  
with your message,  
you generally try to make it sound,  
you know - appealing.

Come and follow me,  
I'll make you happy.  
I'll give you everything you could ever want,  
and more.

But that's not the way Jesus chooses to go;  
he tells them like it is,  
from the very beginning.

We heard this warning last week as well -  
I am sending you like sheep  
into the midst of wolves.

It speaks to how powerful an experience  
it must have been,  
to be with him in the flesh,  
otherwise, why would anyone,  
head off on such a mission?

There's one point today in particular,  
I want us to think about.  
It's something faithful Christians hear so often,  
that we might have missed it this time,  
or at least,  
we might have missed its significance.

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Whoever loves father or mother,  
or son or daughter,  
is not worthy of me, and - here it comes -

Whoever does not take up the cross  
and follow me,  
is not worthy of me.

Yes, we hear that language again and again,  
take up our cross and follow Jesus,  
but here's why it's such a big deal this time.

This is the very first time,  
the cross is mentioned in the New Testament.  
In fact, it's the first time it's mentioned  
in Holy Scripture at all.

And today -  
the very first we ever hear about the cross,  
the first time Jesus names it,

It's not \*his cross,  
it's ours.

Jesus promises the cross to us,  
before he takes up his own;  
it's there from the very beginning,  
and that matters.

It tells us two things -  
the cross was always part of the plan.  
It didn't happen by accident  
or because something went wrong.

No matter what else might have happened,  
no matter how the story of Jesus unfolded,  
we were always going to end up  
before the cross.

The cross wasn't some unexpected evil,  
God had to overcome;  
it was from the start,  
the way God intended us to walk,  
because - point 2 - the cross is the mission.

The cross itself was the reason  
the Word took flesh and dwelt among us.

Jesus' proclamation that  
the Kingdom of Heaven had come near,

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is made most clear from the cross.

The mission wasn't the sermons,  
or the feeding of the multitudes,  
or the parables -  
those are all signs of the Kingdom,  
but they weren't the main point.

Remember what Jesus gave  
his apostles authority to do  
in the reading we heard last week?

Heal the sick; cast out demons; raise the dead -  
all evidence of that Jesus was coming,  
to break the power of death itself,  
and \*that is the work of the cross.

There's a reason the cross has become  
the enduring symbol of real Christianity  
throughout the centuries,  
rather than an empty tomb.

Without the cross,  
the tomb is just a hole in the ground;  
it means nothing.  
But together, the cross and  
the empty tomb are everything.

They are the means by which  
the powers of this world are overthrown,  
and the power of death is broken.

Even so, we have to choose it.  
Jesus may make the way of the cross,  
to be the way of life,  
and he offers that life to any and all,  
but we have to choose to take it up,  
or it becomes a gift left unopened.

To take up the cross means,  
that we are willing to put to death,  
all those parts of us -  
of our hearts and minds and wills -  
that would choose what we want  
only for ourselves,  
over what God wants for us,  
and for the world.

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To choose the cross is to choose Jesus,  
to choose his way of life and love  
over everything else.

That's why there's no soft sell,  
no sugarcoating of the mission.  
That's why Jesus tells us up front,  
this way of life I'm offering,  
comes with a cross.

The life of the cross,  
is the only life Jesus ever knew.  
Without it,  
we, and the rest of the world,  
are still subject to the power of death;

But with it, and with Him,  
this life with the cross,  
the only one he offers,  
is the one that leads to eternal life.