

The Reality of Jerusalem - Matthew 16: 21-28
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 31, 2008
Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA + Pastor Roy Almquist

Blanche Culpepper was a mature woman of unusual bearing and substance. Left in a comfortable state after the death of her husband, she filled her time caring for others and serving wherever she could. On this particular Friday she had driven an hour north of Ashville to visit her great-aunt in a nursing home. Returning home, she stopped, as was her custom, at a particular *Morrison's Cafeteria* that featured on Fridays a wonderful New England clam chowder.

Blanche parked her Lincoln Town Car at the end of the parking lot, so no one would scratch it, and moved quickly through the line, purchasing a large bowl of soup. She found a table, placed her coat and purse over the back of the chair, and then returned to the counter to get a spoon and a napkin.

Upon returning to the table, Blanche was shocked to find an elderly man, sitting at the table, brazenly eating her New England clam chowder! "Excuse me," she said sharply. The man looked up, smiled, but continued to eat the soup. Blanche was appalled by his rudeness. She sat down and pulled the soup to the middle of the table and with her large spoon joined him in eating the chowder.

When the soup was gone, the elderly gentlemen rose, walked away, and came back with two cups of coffee. By this time Blanche was so upset she could not say a word. The man drank his coffee slowly and, when he was done, he rose, bowed ever so slightly, and walked to the door.

As he walked out Blanche suddenly remembered her purse. Instinctively she felt the back of her chair, but it was not there! This was the final outrage. She rose to her feet and stumbled after the man .. until she was stopped cold by the discovery of another table .. with her coat and her purse on the chair .. and an untouched bowl of New England clam chowder on the table, precisely where she had placed it!

Blanche is a symbol for the church today. Like Blanche, American Christianity has a feeling of confidence and entitlement. For a long time we have been the religious game in this nation. We consider ourselves the keepers of the national morality, the ones who determine who is "good" and who is "bad."

But sadly, like Blanche, we can become bewildered. We can confuse our preferences and predilections for truth. We can overlook our faults and errors, blaming them on others. We can develop terrible attitudes towards those we have defined as the “outsiders.” Like Blanche, we can easily be wrong. We can lose our way in the walk of faith, convinced we are faithful Christians, while actually far from the will of God.

Our Gospel lesson this morning speaks to the contrast between our perceptions and God’s intentions. It contains one of Jesus’ hardest sayings: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* [Matthew 16: 24]

Clearly this is a passage we would happily forgo. We like to hear words like: *Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest;* [Matthew 11: 28] or *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son ...* [John 3: 16] These are words that bring us comfort and a sense of assurance. But deny yourself and take up your cross .. this is not what we want to hear.

If we were to track the most successful preachers in this country today, we would discover that most do not talk about sacrifice, self-denial, and servanthood. They focus on success, prosperity, and blessings. Joel Osteen, the superstar pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, fills an 18,000-seat converted sports arena with a message about *gaining blessings from God and reaching your fullest potential.* No talk of Jerusalem or the cross in the mega-churches.

But today’s Gospel lesson cannot be sanitized. It continues a story that began when Jesus asked his disciples: *who do men say that I am?* The disciples rehashed all the popular theories until a bold, impetuous Peter blurted out ... *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*

It was a marvelous moment and Jesus responded with joy, praising Peter and assuring his disciples that upon the *ROCK* of Peter’s bold confession, Jesus would build his Church and nothing would overwhelm it. But in our Gospel lesson this morning we see Peter change from champ to chump in the space of six verses! Peter had the first part right – being a Christian means you confess that Jesus is the Son of God. But the second part is the Christian walk, the ability to deny yourself for the sake of others and the kingdom, and take up a cross. This did not appeal to Peter at all.

When Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem, he angered the Lord and received a most stinging rebuke: *Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on God's concerns but on human things.*

I think this is the place where we are most easily compromised as Christians. Like Peter, we, too, would rather focus on our day-to-day concerns and play down God's intentions for our lives. I love the moment in our Gospel lesson when we are told that Peter took Jesus aside [Matthew 16: 22]. I think we are forever trying to take Jesus aside to explain to him ..

- *Why this is not a good time for us to assume a significant role in his kingdom;*
- *Why we need to hold on to 95% or 98% of what we receive from the Lord, instead of being the generous stewards we know we should be;*
- *Why it is hard for us to come regularly to worship and make a commitment that our children will experience the meaning of Christian community.*

It is easy to pile on Peter, but, like Peter, we can easily be shortsighted. We would rather focus on what we want and, if possible, find the easy way. We realize this as we prepare for the resumption next week of Sunday Church School, Confirmation, and all the regular schedule of church activities. A congregation the size of Calvary should not have a shortage of Sunday School teachers but we do. Clearly some whom the Lord is calling are simply not responding. That attitude is precisely what caused Jesus to rebuke Peter.

When Jesus says, Get behind me, Satan!, he is reminding Peter and all of us that it is Jesus who is to establish the agenda for our lives ... it is Jesus who must determine what is most important. Christianity is the way of Jesus Christ. Christianity is the fellowship of all those who believe in Jesus and have given their lives to him.

The reality of Jerusalem continues to darken our horizon and cloud our future. We have been called to follow Jesus Christ ... to live lives that matter ... to deny ourselves. But this is so hard to do in a culture that stresses pleasure, consumption, and self-satisfaction.

Which brings us back to Blanche Culpepper. *Blanche was pretty sure that stranger was eating her chowder!* In her heart, she had judged his behavior as offensive and an outrage. Blanche was sure she was right but she was very wrong. Let us learn from dear Blanche the simple truth that the way we see things may not be the way things are.

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us. Amen.