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**Operation Cross**

**September 3, 2017**

**Matthew 16:21-28**

Grace and Peace to you from God Our Father and from the one who calls you to take up your cross and follow, Jesus Christ, Our Lord, amen.

As you know I’m a retired Air Force officer. During my time in the Air Force I deployed 3 times and each deployment had its own mission name. The first time it was to Cairo Egypt for a military exercise called Operation Bright Star. Our military joined forces with other militaries from the middle east as well as our NATO allies not only to practice working together, but as a demonstration to any potential adversaries what we could to together. In that regard, we were Bright Stars in the desert of Egypt. Then I was called on to serve in another military exercise called Solid Shield. This time I was in a predominantly Naval exercise where we were practicing to be a solid shield, defending the eastern coast of the United States. I remember when President Reagan sent troops to the tiny Island Nation of Granada. The insurgents had captured the medical school and were holding the med students hostage. The military dubbed that deployment Operation Just Cause because we were there to make right the injustice caused by the bad guys. My last real deployment came when Saddam Hussain decided he wanted to take over Kuwait. This time I headed off not for military exercises, but for the real thing. We deployed so fast there wasn’t time to think up a catchy name that would capture the just of our mission, so after we got settled into our deployed site the brass decided to ask us what we thought the name of our operation should be. Being the natural cynic that I am, I took a previous operation name and added my own spin and suggested we be known as Operation Just Because, instead of Just Cause… As you probably remember, they didn’t take my suggestion and started referring to our operation first as Desert Shield and then when the hostilities actually started changed that to Desert Storm.

So, why this long history lesson about military operational names? In our Gospel text today Jesus defines the divine mission for both himself, the Christ, and for us, Christians. Had he given the mission an operational name it might have been the “Cross.” The cross was where Jesus was headed and the place where His divine mission was fulfilled. The Apostle Peter, however, objected to this. Coming directly on the heels of his great confession that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of the Living God, Peter now rebukes Jesus for his description of exactly what being Messiah is all about. Peter felt the divine mission should instead be called something less frightening, less live threatening like maybe Operation Couch. You know, where you could sit back and watch rather than getting personally involved. But it’s the cross, and not the couch, that defines the divine mission for Christ and Christians. Those who don’t accept this are allies of Satan and will lose their life for eternity. Am I exaggerating? Let’s find out.

Just last Sunday we heard about Peter’s grand confession. Jesus must have beamed with pride as his favorite student finally seemed to be catching on. Jesus was so pleased he even gave Peter his new name. Simon, Bar Jonah, he said, you are now Peter. On this rock, I will build my church. Simon became known as Peter from that time on. In the Greek, the name Peter is Cephas and it literally means rock. So today, Jesus calls his best student, his pride and joy, Satan. How’d Peter take such a swift fall from grace? When Simon confessed Jesus as the Christ, Son of the Living God, he finally recognized the true identity of Jesus. While Peter had a divine understanding of Jesus’ identity, his grasp of Jesus’ mission was diabolical.

It all derailed when Jesus told his disciples clearly for the first time that “he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matthew 16:21b). What? Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, suffer and be killed in Jerusalem? Oh, that couldn’t be God’s plan. So, the Rock takes Jesus aside like some little kid being scolded for speaking out of turn. Jesus whirled on “Rocky” and snorted, Get behind me, Satan! You’re a stumbling block! You don’t have in mind Godly things, but the things of men!

He may have meant well, but Peter had inadvertently lobbed at Jesus one of the temptations Satan himself had used in the wilderness after Jesus’ baptism. At that time Satan told Jesus if he wanted to receive glory and honor from all the nations, he didn’t have to bloody himself on the cross. He could just bow down to him instead. Satan was offering Jesus a crown without the cross, but Jesus knew there would be no crown for us if he didn’t endure the cross.

Whenever someone thinks they just need to follow the Golden Rule and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” there’s great delight in hell. You see, Satan’s goal isn’t to make this world a living hell where murderers and child molesters roam the streets uncontested. He’s quite content to have a world full of law-abiding citizens who mow the lawn for the shut-in down the street and who return dropped $20 bills instead of pocketing them as long as these people think that by doing these good acts they don’t need the cross of Christ.

Telling Jesus that he didn’t need to suffer and die would be like telling your insurance company it doesn’t need to pay for the damage you did to your car. Well if the insurance company isn’t going to pay, then who is? Someone has to if your car is going to get fixed. If Jesus hadn’t died on the cross, we would still be on the hook for our sins. Ditch the cross and you leave us sinners to fend for ourselves… Aren’t you glad Jesus put Peter in his place? Aren’t you glad Jesus understood the divine mission outlined for him was defined by the cross and not the couch?

The cross, doesn’t just define Jesus’ divine mission; it defines the divine mission for all Christians. Jesus put it this way: “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? (Matthew 16:24-26a)

Jesus’ cross was made out of wood, but what does your cross look like? Christians often list things like migraines, loneliness, a learning disability, unemployment, family problems, a bad back, arthritis or whatever ails you at the moment… While these are challenges of life, they aren’t the cross Jesus is talking about. Look carefully again at his words. How does Jesus say a Christian takes up his cross? By denying yourself and following him. Here’s what that looks like. When your spouse wants to see a country music concert, but you only like rock and roll. You deny yourself, that is, you say “no” to what YOU want to do and say “yes” to what your spouse wants. Or, you’re out shopping and you see this really great new thing you really want. Instead of jumping on it, you remember the suffering of the people in Texas and instead surf on over to the ELCA website and donate the money you were going to use to buy that great new thing to help the people of Texas instead. You’re following Jesus because, like him, you’re putting others first. Our goal in life is to serve, not to be served. You deny yourself when you defer your wants and desires to the needs of others.

Showing love to your spouse is easy, but what about to the stranger or even worse to the one who hurt you? That’s why Jesus compares it to carrying a cross and not to lounging on a couch! Denying ourselves is hard. By nature, every breath we take is in the hope of accomplishing our will, but the cross, not the couch--that’s our divine mission! Deny your desires and your longing to get your way and instead lose yourself in Jesus. That’s not as scary as it sounds. You do it every time you board an airplane. You “lose yourself” when you entrust its controls to the trained pilot. Sure, it might be fun to fly that plane yourself, but it would also be a sure way to ruin your life and the lives of others and a very expensive airplane... Entrust your life to the one whose every word, every thought, and every deed was never for his own comfort and convenience, but for the benefit of others...and still is. That’s why we can deny ourselves and say “no” to our wants and desires. Jesus knows what we need and he will provide it.

Peter must have been astonished when Jesus called him Satan. If he really listened to Jesus he would have known while the cross defined Jesus’ divine mission, it wasn’t the end. Jesus also plainly taught his disciples after he was killed he would rise again three days later. Neither is the cross the end for us. Those who continue to put others first, motivated and empowered by Jesus’ forgiving love, will one day find the cross has given way to the crown – a crown of everlasting happiness when Jesus raises us from the dead to be free forever from our sins and their painful consequences. But before the crown comes the cross. May you bear your crosses joyfully and be blessed in your serving, amen.