**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

**United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon August 30, 2020**

**THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

PRELUDE *Tierce en Taille (Mass for the Convents)* | François Couperin Katherine Crosier

ANNOUNCEMENTS Lori Yamashiro

OPENING SENTENCES

God has promised to be with us and among us today as we worship in a spirit of humility and holiness. So, let us invite God to be our “true mirror,” to hold up before us God’s holy words in such a way that we see our true selves. Let us bravely look into God’s radiance to see, in a new way, the fullness of God’s ineffable glory, and transcendent grace and mercy. Through our worship, and God’s great generosity, let us discover and be empowered to live in the world, announcing God’s rule of justice, reconciliation and peace.

CALL TO CONFESSION Rev. Jeannie Thompson

We know that we have not lived according to God’s desires for us. The brokenness in the world, and the sin and despair in our hearts, threaten to consume us like a mighty flood. Yet God is our hope and our firm foundation.

*Let us confess our sin before our gracious God.*

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Creating God, in love you moved over the waters of chaos and separated sea from dry land. And yet, we cling tightly to rigid boundaries of our own making. You claim us in the waters of baptism and declare us dead to sin and alive in Christ. But too often we deny that call, conforming ourselves to the whims of culture. At Pentecost, you released your wild and transforming spirit to flow through the church and world. But we want to tame that wildness, channeling your spirit through banks of ordered safety. Transform us, we pray. Soften the unyielding edges of our hearts. Loosen our grip on “the way it always has been” and prepare us for the joy of “the way it still can be,” through Jesus Christ. Amen.

***(Please offer God your prayers of confession as we keep a brief silence.)***

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Friends, hear the good news. Jesus Christ’s love is deep and faithful. His power is unequaled, his grace is unrestrained, his strength is steadfast, and his embrace is sufficient to carry all that we are and hope to be. Friends, believe the good news! In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

PASSING THE PEACE

*In the safest way possible, please pass the peace of Christ to those who are with you.*

A READING FROM THE GOSPELS Rachel Stucke

## *Matthew 16:21-28 The Cross*

*21From 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. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ 23But 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.’*

*24Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For 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. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’*

SERMON *“Blessed Cross”* Pastor

The passage we heard was, I think, a good one for us to hear and this time of the year. By now, we have experienced both political conventions. Those of us who watched them—even the party we support—will have to admit that a lot of the descriptions of the candidates—both the good and the bad—all of them were really quite extravagant.

Each man, we are told, is capable of so much good. So, we can place all of our hopes on his shoulders with perfect assurance that he is strong and good and ready to make all of our hopes and dreams a reality.

After all of that hyperbole, we hear the story of Jesus and Peter as they sort out what it means to be that Messiah.

Peter was a fisherman by trade. He was a commercial fisherman. For me, this suggests an active life filled with hard, physical work. Every day was spent struggling against the tide as he took his boat out into deep waters. Then there was the hauling of the nets, heavy and saturated with sea water—on a good day, the catch of fish that would add to their weight.

Aside from the actual catching of fish, I can imagine there was a multitude of other tasks: checking and mending the nets, inspecting the hull of the boat for barnacles and other things that could weaken the wood, maintaining the ropes and the sail, and securing the mast and the oars.

Aside from all of these necessary tasks, Peter would need to sell or barter his catch. So, he would have needed to understand the market, the demand, and the competition. He would need to know how to price his fish low enough so that they sold quickly, but not so low that he did not make money. Figured into his prices was the need to cover all of his expenses and reap a decent profit for him and his family to live on.

What I am getting at is that we tend to think of Peter as a simple man, sort of a country bumpkin, but when you think about it, he was a man with a skill and a profitable business. Peter was a businessman who traded and negotiated and did all of the things, and had all of the skills and knowledge that small businessmen needed then, and probably many of the skills modern business people still need and employ.

So, Peter may not have been a scholar, but he was not a yokel. He was not simple, or naive, and easily deceived, failing to see through false pretenses. Indeed, from the way he is depicted in the passage we heard this morning, Peter is quite particular about how Jesus was going to present himself. He was a man who knew what to look for in a Messiah, and he had certain expectations about what that meant.

Just a few moments earlier before the passage that we heard, Jesus has asked the disciples to tell him who they thought he was. By this time, Peter and the others had seen and heard quite a lot. They had seen demons cast out and minds and spirits being made whole. They had seen people who had been sick for many years, some on their deathbed, with one touch, or even just a word from Jesus, the sick and dying were healed and whole again.

So, Jesus asks them who it is they believe him to be. And when he does, it was Peter who immediately came forward with his answer. “You are the Messiah,” he says, “the Son of the living God.”

Impetuous but correct.

Indeed, Jesus acknowledges Peter’s correct response with a promise and a declaration: “On this rock,” says Jesus, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

This must have been pretty heady stuff for Peter!

But it must have also given him a very particular idea about how life was going to unfold from then on. After all, this is for whom a whole nation has been looking and waiting for generations – the Messiah.

For Peter, this signaled holiness, even reverence.

It must have also suggested majesty—like a king or someone of such elevated rank; someone others would bow down to, fuss over, even set upon to a throne…maybe even the throne in the palace where Herod, the pretender, sat. Now that would be something—to take over Herod’s opulent palace.

This is what Peter must have thought or expected was going to happen—all of the rough-living and work was going to be behind them. Now, life would be orderly, even tidy—because this is what comes with wealth and station: you rise above the smaller tasks of everyday life.

Jesus was the Messiah, and Peter was going to be his foundation. Surely, this is nothing less than a promise of power, authority, prestige. From now on, Peter and his friend, the Messiah, they were going to be in control everything, and everyone was going to have to move out of their way!

The passage we heard was the one where Jesus pops Peter’s happy bubble and makes all of his exalted expectations fall away.

If the in-breaking into the world of God’s ways of love and mercy was going to be anything, it was not going to be the continued human lust for control over everyone and everything. It was going to be about humility, loving, giving—it was going to mean *serving* others.

It means having a Messiah who draws people to himself through self-giving…even to the cross.

…Perhaps Peter did not hear the rest of what Jesus had said to him—the part about resurrection. Peter was so concentrating on strictly human definitions of things that he might have missed that last part. He may not have understood it, but you and I must.

What Jesus was communicating to him was not a philosophy. He was not trying to get him into a new “program” aimed at “better living.” Jesus’ mission and ambition was much greater than that!

What Jesus was ushering into the world, and into Peter’s life, and into yours and mine, was a new appreciation of what the power of God—whose power is love—can and will do. This is a power that is stronger than death, that can, in fact, *defeat* death and replace it with eternal life. That is the real power that the true Messiah will have in peoples’ lives—this is what Jesus wants Peter to see and to understand.

However, to receive that power, says Christ, we must be willing to take up our own cross.

Most of the time, when we hear that phrase, we think of Jesus carrying the heavy cross to his crucifixion. It is a thought that brings us some pain at the thought of it, and (I hope) tremendous gratitude.

We are grateful for the length of love that Jesus went for us. Many of us became Christians because of this story and what it says to us about God’s love for us, and how this makes our life more than the daily tasks of living. God’s love has the power to make our daily life and everything we do, everything we receive, a blessing.

I cannot help but believe that we are also grateful because we suspect that we will not be asked to make such a painful and humiliating sacrifice like Jesus. We are glad and grateful that the cross we being called upon to carry is not literally a cross, like the one Jesus carried to his death.

The good news is: you are right, *most of us* will *not* be called upon to such public displays of courage and sacrifice. However, the crosses that we do carry can still be a blessing.

The other news is that there *is still a cross*, and we *are* expected to shoulder it. In fact, there will be many crosses in our lives, but we need not be worried or afraid of this. We have Jesus’ promise of help, but we also have his promise of blessing.

I was recently speaking to our friend and sister, Gail, who was hurriedly packing for a move that she’s making. It’s an awful task, packing! There are so many things to take, but also a lot to leave behind. And just when you think you packed it all, there is just so much more.

Gail told me she was trudging through the process, and it was hard going. There was so much to put into boxes, but also so much that she was not going to take. Those things had to be taken care of, too. More work dealing with the cast-offs—what a pain!

And then she realized that the things she was *not* going to take could be more than cast-offs. That is: they *could* be much more than things she was leaving behind. They could be, they *were*, quite possibly, going to be blessings for other people.

From that moment on, the packing got a little easier as Gail very intentionally blessed the item and its next owner before letting it go.

That is the way we are meant to find, and carry our crosses—not as a burden, but as a way of blessing. That is: we can let love transform our crosses into blessings.

And Gail’s story is very helpful because it is a story about change—moving from one place to another. The crosses we carry will always be about some kind of change we are being asked, or are obligated to make.

Worshipping electronically is one change we would not have made on our own, but we are doing it! And think about what went into this decision—it has all been about what is good for all of our church family. The most wonderful thing about it is that this sacrifice, the cross that we are carrying, is also good for the rest of our families, and even the greater community—the more of us that stay home and be safe, the fewer people there will be to be infected, the fewer medical personnel who will be over worked, and exposed to the virus. This is a cross that we are carrying, but we can experience it as a transformation.

Life is filled with crosses that we are meant to carry and to allow God to transform into blessings. It is rarely easy, but if we invite God’s Holy Spirit to guide us as we shoulder our crosses, we give ourselves the opportunity to see and live through the transformation that God is making. We give ourselves a chance to live into the love and blessing of God.

And as we do, we also find that all our fear and the reluctance drain away, replaced by God’s abiding, loving presence, giving us strength to move on, to move ahead, to so love and serve in God’s name.

So, do not be afraid by this call to take up your cross and follow Jesus, but instead, let us take up our crosses together, and let us follow Jesus into blessing, hope, and the future. Amen.

MUSIC FOR MEDITATION *Récit de Cornet* | François Couperin Katherine Crosier

PASTORAL PRAYER & THE LORD’S PRAYER

*We thank you for your faithfulness to the ministries and mission of our church.*

*Please send your offering directly to the church.*

DOXOLOGY

**BENEDICTION**

Go forth in the love of God, shed abroad in your hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Go forth more for the needs and concerns of others than for your own interests.

Go forth to honor the name of Jesus Christ — ushering in his kingdom for all to see. Amen.

**POSTLUDE *Agincourt Hymn* | John Dunstable** Katherine Crosier