

**11 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17 – Year A – August 28, 2011**  
**Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28**  
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As the story goes, the young man was at the end of his rope. His life was a mess. His problems were so overwhelming that they seemed to crush his spirit. Day after day, he forced himself to go on with an increasingly heavy heart. Finally, seeing no way out, he dropped to his knees in prayer. “Lord, I can’t go on,” he said, “my cross is just too heavy to bear.” Suddenly finding himself in a strange place, the Lord replied, “My son, if you can’t bear its weight, just place your cross inside this room. Then open the door and pick any cross you wish.” Waves of relief washed over him. The light was dim inside the room. Stumbling a little, he placed his cross against the wall. He felt dizzy with relief as he laid his burden down. “Thank you, Lord,” he sighed. Then seeing the door etched in the gloomy light, he moved towards it and opened it. Unlike the first room this room was brightly lit. He gazed around in wonder at the crosses all around him. Some were so large the tops were not even visible. Many were made of huge planks of wood. Some were highly ornate, forged out of precious metals and dotted with shining jewels. Beginning to feel a quiver of fear ripple through him, he finally spotted a tiny cross leaning against the far wall. Sighing, he whispered, “I’d like that one, Lord.” The Lord replied, “My son, that’s the cross you brought in.” Sometimes we all need the reassurance that God is with us, and constantly sharing our load, the challenges and burdens of our life. Often that lesson comes with a broader, more Christ-focused, and less self-focused, change in perspective.

The reading from Matthew’s Gospel follows on from Peter’s bold proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But Peter is bearing a cross that many of us share in life. He’s missed the mark by assuming he knows what being the Messiah means for Jesus, and for the redemption of Israel. Sin is also known as missing the mark. So is yielding to Satan’s temptations, which is why Jesus immediately rebukes Peter. Peter the rock, whose faith in Jesus is supposed to be a blessed model for all disciples becomes Peter the stumbling stone, denying God’s truth, because he believes he knows better. Peter’s prophetic words identify Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, but in his own mind, he’s sure that he knows exactly what Jesus the Messiah is about to do, and how the glory of God is about to be revealed. He’s filtered the small knowledge he has through a poorly quality mirror, and the resulting reflection, manifest in Peter’s scandalous comments, is almost the exact opposite of the truth that Jesus has just shared with the disciples. The truth is Jesus is going to Jerusalem to “undergo great suffering” at the hands of his own religious leaders. He will be crucified, and yet God will raise Him again on the third day. Welcome to discipleship 101!

Our own lives are also frequently marred and distorted because we have our own glorious visions of what we want and how our lives should unfold. Unfortunately, our splendid visions don’t always match God’s vision of what is best for us. Nor do they always accord with God’s gracious provision of what we truly need, in order to serve Him and our neighbors. In business, it’s called managing expectations. Not surprisingly the key is clear, frequent, and honest communication with the customer. A good relationship is necessary for the best level of communication. In business we call it a good working relationship. Anyone who’s ever worked in sales can tell us that good business relationships are built through face-to-face meetings, picking up the phone, and keeping in touch. Continued goodwill often relies on carefully matching and managing expectations with the product or service. Sales folks also teach us that it’s important to be proactive. Don’t wait for an angry customer to call, instead manage expectations proactively by offering alternate solutions for their needs. On a spiritual level, we already have an intimate relationship with God through the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. God’s already taken the initiative to be in constant contact with each of us, and to provide us with the best possible guide through the maze of life. Since the triune nature of God is relational, then it’s no surprise that God desires to be in open, frequent, and honest communication with all of His children. The times in our lives when we’re deeply frustrated, even

angry, or filled with stress and anxiety usually correlate with some loss of perspective, some unfulfilled desire, or misguided expectations. Think about it. Reflect on those times in your own life, we all have them. It's also amazing how many times our anger and frustration also correlate with the disintegration of our prayer lives, Bible study, and other spiritual disciplines. These are usually times when we've stopped seeking and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and taken a personal detour. After Peter's outburst, Jesus goes on to explain what God expects of every disciple, every follower of Jesus Christ.

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Three weeks ago, we heard another story about Peter, when he boldly steps out of the boat at Jesus' invitation. The question that day was about Peter's and our willingness to step out of ourselves, and risk moving closer to Jesus. His bold move also gave the disciples the courage to trust their lives to the Lord. There's another question that's pertinent to today's reading. Are we lost in Christ? Are we so filled with His love that we're grateful for every moment. So filled by His peace and joy that we're constantly seeking to serve the Lord and our neighbors? This is actually part of our ongoing transformation in Christ. Most of us would agree that being lost in Christ isn't completely true of our lives. Yet we all have such moments. On the other hand, too often we allow Satan to tempt us. Being the opportunist, when we think we know better than God, Satan leverages our dissatisfaction. He whispers that God is making us carry a cross that's unnecessarily heavy, or that we deserve something better, or something more in our lives. This passage is a warning to us all. If we're experiencing a major dissonance between what we think should be happening or deserve, and what is really going on in our lives, then it's time to get reconnected with God. It's time to repent and return to the Lord, seeking God's will. And time to listen to the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, guiding us into all goodness and truth.

Christ's invitation to take up our cross doesn't extend to looking for crosses to bear. There's nothing we can do to gain God's grace and favor. What we are called to do is humbly and obediently give ourselves in service to God and our neighbors. Our lives will then reflect God's will, and the sharing of our spiritual gifts. Jesus doesn't seek the cross. His own mission of love, compassion and service for the life of the world, is enough to have him nailed to the cross. As Martin Luther writes in *Freedom of the Christian*, anyone who has a spouse or a family already has built-in crosses enough. Jesus shows us that a disciple's life is one of joyful service to the Lord, but not one exempt from suffering. God doesn't give us more than we can bear. When we stay focused on God's will, we have a much better perspective on life. We realize that growing in our relationship with the Lord is *the* most important thing we can do. Flowing out of our relationship with Christ is the realization that discipleship is about giving of ourselves. It is a life shaped and defined by our stewardship of all that God has placed in our care. In relationship, we come to experience the joy of sacrificial living beyond ourselves as a blessing. And we realize that in Christ, our burdens are light. Like many others of his time, Peter bought into the worldview that the Messiah was coming in power to defeat the Roman Empire, and restore Israel's glory. Peter thought wrong. If we think that we can save ourselves by our lifetime achievements, we're also wrong. If we're spending most of our time and resources striving to gain the world, then we're missing out on real life, and denying our freedom in Christ. The beautiful paradox of every disciple's life is that the more we lose ourselves, the closer we have moved towards Christ.

Amen.