**Year A – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Matthew 16:21-26**

**September 17, 2017**

No Pain, No Gain

1. The things of men: No pain is gain (Vv21-23)
2. The things of God: Gain only through pain (Vv24-26)

Introduction

Perhaps you are familiar with the phrase, “No Pain, No Gain.” It’s often used by people who are training for an athletic competition or simply training to get into better shape. Perhaps you have seen it in weight rooms or workout rooms. The point is very simple: If you want to get into shape, you will have to work hard for it. Stronger muscles don’t come by sitting on the couch for hours every day. The best athletes are often that way because they have worked harder and endured more pain in their training regimen than anyone else.

The same is often true with the things of God. No Pain, No Gain. Being a Christian isn’t easy, no matter how much we might wish it was. And some false teachers play upon these wishes by teaching a “theology of glory”, saying that being a Christian will make your life on earth easier. And so we see many churches which claim to be “Christian” teaching very little about salvation by Jesus alone, and very much about “how this church can better your life.”

Well, Jesus has something to say about that today. He reminds us that the things of men tell us that no pain is gain—that avoiding pain in life is the ultimate goal, at least according to human philosophy. But the things of God tell us that gain only comes through pain, especially the heaven Jesus won through his pain.

Setting the scene

We continue our walk through the end of Jesus’ ministry today. The words we have today come on the heels of last week’s sermon meditation, where Jesus was with the disciples in Caesarea Philippi, where Peter had given the solid rock-like confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Now, Jesus is exploring with the disciples what that means. As the Christ, the anointed one, the Son of the living God, he has a different job description than everyone else. His pain would be gain for all people.

Part 1: The things of men: No pain is gain (Vv21-23)

Our text begins, “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples 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 tells us that “Jesus began” to explain to his disciples these things. The scope of his ministry and the way he trains his disciples are changing here. From here on out, the cross will loom larger and larger on the horizon. His disciples needed to know that. In the past he had alluded to his suffering and death, but now he spells it out in unmistakable language.

He says he *must* go to Jerusalem. He “set his face like flint” for Jerusalem, according to Isaiah. He is hardened and determined in his mission. He will go there and undergo immense suffering for the world’s sins. He will suffer, be crucified, die, and rise again. It didn’t seem fair. It wasn’t fair! But it’s what needed to happen. What would have been fair would have been for the entire world, you and I included, to go to hell for their sins. Praise God that Jesus set out to bear that suffering in our place.

We know this as Christians. We have the entire Bible in front of us. It gives the entire history of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, and what it means to us. The disciples didn’t have that yet. And Peter, especially, didn’t want Jesus to suffer. Our text says, “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’”

Jesus responds as emphatically as possible, “Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’”

It’s easy to fall in line with “the things of men”, isn’t it? After all, we are surrounded by sin and temptation. The temptation is just to go along with the rest of the world and live as easy and comfortable life as possible, that should be the goal—at least according to the things of men. Obsess over financial gain, care very little about spiritual gain. Lust over someone that isn’t our spouse, it’s not hurting anybody! Engage in gossip, because bringing others down makes us feel good about ourselves for some sad reason. Keep all our resources for ourselves; don’t give much at all to the Lord and his work. Despise the Word of God by not hearing it regularly. And the list goes on and on.

And as I mentioned earlier, we often hear from false teachers that being a Christian will lead to success in this life, will enhance our financial status, will make our lives pain-free. But these are the things of men. Life on earth is so temporary; what God has in mind is eternity. Human beings are so narrowly focused on their short lives on this earth, setting up false gods all around them. Caring about our lives on this planet more than our eternity. So simply, avoid pain, they say! Live the good life!

But it seems as though pleasure in life is often followed by pain. Those who had it all and put their trust in their earthly lives are often devastated when it all comes crashing down. Ask those who witnessed the Roaring Twenties followed by the devastation of the Great Depression. Ask those who just lost their multi-million-dollar homes in the Florida Keys this week. Ask those who have had wonderful, thriving families, only to lose those families suddenly in tragedy. Our hearts go out to such people. We pray for these people and seek to help however we can. But we have no delusions that we can escape pain on this planet, especially if we are followers of Christ. In fact, we as his followers might face far more pain than the rest of the world does.

Part 2: The things of God: Gain only through pain (Vv24-26)

Jesus speaks to that fact, saying, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”

According to tradition, all the disciples except for John were put to death because they were Christian. In fact, a great many Christians were put to death in the first few centuries following Christ. They were crucified, skinned alive, whipped, thrown into arenas to be eaten by lions, and died many other terrible deaths.

And worldwide persecution of Christians has continued throughout history. In fact, with as horribly as the early Christians were persecuted, Christians worldwide are persecuted to a far greater degree today. The last century has featured more Christians killed for their faith than in the previous 19 centuries combined! We’ve been largely sheltered from it here in America because we still enjoy religious freedom here, and because our media downplays how badly Christians are treated in other countries, so we don’t hear much about this persecution. But it has been a century of bloodshed for Christians across the globe.

But the worst bloodshed, and the worst injustice of all time, was taken out on Jesus. He took up his cross and allowed himself to be nailed to it. He was doing it in our place, leaving his home in eternity to win eternity for us. His pain was our gain. An eternal gain.

And, warmed by the gospel truth that Christ suffered and died for us, that he won eternity for us, we gladly take up our crosses. We say goodbye to ourselves and our selfishness and we get lost in living for Christ, even if that means suffering for his name. The world is a horribly sinful, horribly unfair place, and because of that, we as Christians may suffer. We may be mocked, persecuted, may even lose our lives because we are Christians.

But Jesus says, “Whoever loses his life for me will find it.” We have no need to fear. Satan cannot touch us, even as he uses the world to persecute us. We belong to Christ. We were baptized into his family. And as we regularly hear his Word and take his Sacrament, he strengthens us throughout our earthly march all the way to our heavenly home.

Conclusion

How many of you remember your confirmation day? Do you remember what you promised that day? On that day you promised that you would be faithful to your Lord even to the point of death. That you would be willing to endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from your Savior.

How have we done in keeping that promise? Have we denied our Savior simply because it was socially acceptable? Have we not gladly heard his Word regularly? Have we forgotten whom we are in Christ? Have we, rather than taking up our crosses, sought to get out from underneath them?

Our Savior didn’t, and praise God that he didn’t. He scorned the shame of the cross and bore it perfectly in our place. He suffered and died to wash away our sins and bring us into his family. Because of pain, we have eternal gain.

So don’t pursue the things of men! The things which say that no pain is gain. Rather, pursue the things of God which remind us that His pain is our eternal gain. Amen.