

“Everything Can Change In the Blink Of An Eye”

Matthew 16:21-28/Romans 12:9-21

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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It's amazing how much can change in the span of one short week—and sometimes not even that long. In fact, at times, everything can change in the blink of an eye.

Ask anyone who's dealing with a new, serious diagnosis—or has dealt with one previously in their lives. You go from feeling fine, to having a little discomfort in your leg or stiffness in your neck, or maybe being a bit more forgetful than you used to be to finding out you have a cancerous tumor, or a benign, but troublesome cyst, or some other life-changing condition which will now require your undivided attention, the careful intervention of friends and family, not to mention every penny of that high deductible that seemed like such a good deal at the time. Your health is no longer one of many things you need to attend to in your life—it's the only thing, the thing above all else, the thing that matters most.

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This past week, a group of conservative, evangelical Christian leaders—a group some might even call extremists—meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, decided that it was time to produce an exhaustive and thorough theological treatise on why exactly, according to their reading of the Bible and their understanding of Christian doctrine and practice, people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or other queer should be understood not only to be contrary to the design of God's creation, in need of something beyond the free gift of grace offered to others, suggesting that their very salvation is somehow conditioned on them changing their behavior, if not their sexual orientation. And while these particular Christian academics and purported leaders of religious opinion do not speak for the entire Christian community—they certainly don't speak for me, for example, nor for this congregation, our Synod or our denomination—there is no doubt that but making such a public statement of insensitivity and inhospitality one that they went to great lengths to justify based on a harsh and legalistic view of Scripture (in my humble opinion) the writers and signers of the Nashville Declaration did their best to take several steps backwards for any over-arching Christian sense of tolerance, welcome, inclusion, and yes, loving embrace of those sisters and brothers among us and around us who are part of the LGBTQ community. Thankfully, however, many other Christian communities, including An ELCA congregation called the House for All Sinners and Saint came up with their own Declarations, reiterating the

love, mercy, and radical welcome that God gives all of God's children, and encouraging those who would follow Jesus to do the same.

Which can be exhausting, of course. Or as my parent's pastor, Pastor Jill put it: Hurricane Harvey is wreaking havoc in people's lives all over the gulf, white nationalism is on the rise, the thought of nuclear war is no longer an inconceivable reality, but these so-called evangelical leaders decide to focus, instead, on how they believe that LGBTQ persons are an aberration of God's creation. I'm so tired of this!

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We know that, we have seen that so vividly in this past week, as news reports pour in about Hurricane Harvey, first the Houston area, and more recently from Lake Charles and elsewhere in Louisiana. The storm only just made landfall about a week ago, but in that week—and for many people in a few short instances—everything changed. Some places recorded 52 inches of rain over the duration of the storm. That's over four feet of rain—streets flooded, some homes got flooded basements, others flooded well above the first floor. Some churches were flooded, like these photos sent along by Bishop Michael Rinehart of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod of the ELCA, while other churches, Lutheran and otherwise, along with at least a dozen Houston-area Mosques opened their doors to shelter or feed people, to act as a staging area for those seeking emergency services. Along with the stories of people who lost everything—including a number of folks who had intentionally moved to Houston after loosing everything in Hurricane Katrina—we have been hearing moving accounts of selflessness and courage on the part of so many others. People who formed a human chair to rescue an elderly man from his car despite the fast moving current, folks who used bass boats, kayaks, even jet skis to go door to door, making sure everyone was safe, humans who have stepped forward to foster dogs and cats displaced by the storm until their own humans can get back on their feet and send for them in their new homes. Of course, we get to be such humans who look out for and take care of one another—or as the Apostle Paul says in our lesson from Romans today: we are called to “love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” To rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, “ and specifically to contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” That's why I'll leave this slide up—to give you the website and the phone number for the ELCA's Lutheran Disaster Response, were 100% of your contributions will go directly to those affected by Hurricane Harvey, and not just this week or next, but for the long-haul of rebuilding. [Leave the last one up]

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Right here in our gospel readings, everything seems to change—from one week to another, as we've been reading it here in worship, but actually in the space of just a few verses, quite literally a few moments of dialog between Jesus and Peter. Last week, of you remember, Peter was the bold one who, when asked by Jesus "who do you say that I am" dared confess that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And Jesus responded by calling Peter the ROCK, and saying that on the rock of his confession Jesus was going to build his everlasting church. But in the blink of an eye, Peter goes from being superhero, the first among his equal disciples, the brave one, the bold one, the inspired one, to have Jesus call him "Satan," and tell him he needs to get behind him. He goes from being one rock to being another—from the building block for Christ's own church, to the stumbling block to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Peter thought he had done well—which he had, Jesus even said so. But Peter also thought that he had figured it all out, which he hadn't. He had not figured into the equation the cross—the suffering, the pain, the dying. He was counting on Jesus being a different kind of Messiah. A Warrior King like David. The Glorious Conqueror of the Roman Empire. The Liberator of the People. More Vanquishing Victor than Wounded Healer. More Braveheart than Suffering Servant.

So Jesus' words to Peter—as we hear them just a week later, as he hears them only moments later—seem harsh, jarring, unexpected. While last week, Jesus praised him for allowing God to inspire such a faithful confession, this time, Jesus rebukes him for thinking too much of human things and not enough of divine things.

I think Jesus is saying that if we think we have it all figured out, think again. Sure, we live our lives, we make our plans only to have the shock of them being changed in the blink of an eye. We didn't figure in that dreadful diagnosis. We had not planned for a societal set-back, a retreat or regrouping. We certainly are not fully prepared for whatever natural disaster or climatic catastrophe might be out there waiting for us, whether or not our flood insurance is fully paid up, whether or not we've charted evacuation routes, or made contingency plans.

But I think Jesus is also saying that if we think we have it all figured out or some cosmic level, like Peter seemed to think, we do not. That when we think our theology and faith is tight, right, and infallible, it might actually be oppressive

and death-dealing.* It might ignore the role of suffering for the gospel that every disciple has to consider and embrace. It might want to have us skip to the good parts, to bask in Christ's reflected glory rather than take up Jesus' cross; to jump right to Easter Sunday and the empty tomb without making our way through Good Friday, the place called the skull, and that old rugged tool of state-sponsored torture and execution. Like Peter, at times we want the gain without the pain.

Father Richard Rohr, in his daily devotion yesterday said that as we acknowledge, even welcome our own pain, we will in some way feel the pain of the whole world. But thanks to Jesus, we can actually hold this pain because we are being held by the very One who went through on the cross. Jesus was holding all the pain of the world; though the world had come to hate him, he refused to hate it back.

That's what it means to take up our cross and follow. May this be our our work—our labor—today, and every day. Amen.

*Paraphrased from Mitzi Smith, "Commentary on Matthew 16:21-28," www.WorkingPreacher.org, accessed September 2, 2017.