

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota

Matthew 16:21-28
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
 August 31, 2014

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Kids, please bring your parent/grandparent with you when you come up. Kids, each of you has been given some special gifts by God. You have some wonderful things that together make you who you are. Your parents may know what gifts you have more than you do. If I was going to use one word to describe a special gift that my kids had when they were little, I would say this:

Leah – “**smart**” – she always liked to figure things out...

John – “**handy**” – he always tried to build things and to fix things...

Sarah – “**artsy**” – she always made the most beautiful pictures...

I am going to ask your parents/whoever brought you here to print on these big cards **one word** that describes a **wonderful gift** that you have. They might say **happy, funny, smart, pretty, patient, strong, loving**... Once they've quickly jotted down **one word and your name**, both sides of the card, I want us to have a **parade of gifts** around the sanctuary, holding up our gift cards for all to see. Okay, parents print and give your kids the cards. Now it is time for us to parade around with our gifts. We want everyone to see what gifts God has given us. Have you ever been to a parade? When parade floats go by, what do people along the side often do? Wave, shout hello, clap... Let's do that people. And let's sing, “**Oh when the saints come marching in...**” Let's **celebrate these kids' gifts!**

And kids, now we've **seen your gifts**. We've **celebrated your gifts**. **What's next for you?** Now is the time to **use your gifts**. Your parents say that you have these wonderful gifts. God gave you these gifts to use to help make God's world an even better place than it already is. Can you use your gift to help the world? Every day can be a parade when you help other people to be happy and to have better lives!

This is **Labor Day Weekend**. Every year at this time, we remember all of the people who are workers in our world. We use this day to thank everyone for all of the good work that they do. Thank you kids for using your gifts to help the world. Thanks also to all of the people here and out there who use their gifts to help the world through their jobs. And thanks be to God for sharing you and your gifts with us! Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

I attended the **Aitkin Riverboat Days Parade**. As I watched, float after float passed by. I saw many people from our church in the parade. I saw our folks driving the **classic cars**, playing in the **community band**, and marching with the **wrestling team**. I saw our members riding in the **fire trucks**, with the **political floats** and the **Riverboat past royalty**. I saw our people **throwing candy** from **commercial floats** and from **service group floats**. I saw our folks in the **police** and **emergency vehicles**.

I didn't see too many of our members standing along the sidelines. But tons of our members were in the parade. Someone told me later that the number of people watching the parade was smaller than in the past. I once heard of a small town where so many people were marching in the parade that there were hardly any people left to stand and watch the parade go by. That's not all bad. I'm proud of all those who were in the parade.

We had a lot of folks in a **wonderful parade here at the church** a couple of weeks ago. There were nights where 101 people were actively participating in **Vacation Bible School** with almost nobody to sit and watch them. There were 62 kids, an amazing 39 helpers and lots of wild and crazy animals! What a parade!

Jesus talks about a parade of sorts in our Gospel text for today, from **Matthew 16:21-28**. In last week's Gospel text, we hear Jesus commending Peter for proclaiming that **Jesus is the Son of God sent to save the world**. Peter got it **right about who Jesus is**. But this week, Peter gets it **wrong about what Jesus is going to do**. Peter and the boys had spent three years following Jesus and watching him heal the sick, feed the hungry, forgive sinners and even bring someone back from the dead. They wanted to keep Jesus with them. **It was not to be...**

- Jesus didn't come just to be a **good example** for how to live our lives.
- Jesus didn't come to **crush all the enemies** and wicked ones.
- Jesus didn't even come to **solve all the problems** in the world.

Jesus **came to die** for us. Here's how Jesus described his parade route. **"(I) 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."** That "**must**" word means that this is a part of God's

divine plan to save all people. Peter tried to talk Jesus out of it, but there was no stopping Jesus. Jesus had to die at the hands of the world - the enemies, the authorities, the religious leaders, the common folks, you and me – at our own hands. When Peter tried to stop Jesus, Jesus told him that he was doing Satan’s work, that “**you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.**”

Jesus isn’t threatening them with going to hell if they don’t measure up. Jesus is inviting and challenging them to march with him toward eternity. Jesus is not trying to get them to be **good enough to go to heaven when they die.** Jesus is trying to **love them into life here and now.** Jesus must die so that God can come all the way into our lives:

- Into our hopes and dreams
- Into our joys and triumphs
- Into our suffering and even dying

Jesus comes out of God’s own suffering and death in order to literally lift us up, to give us life, and to bless us with **eternal value, hope and meaning.**

Did you catch it in our text? Jesus told those early Christians, “**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. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?**” Our world says, “**You’ve got to focus upon saving your own life.**” Jesus says, that will give us death. Jesus says, “**Focus on giving yourself away, just like I have done for you, and life will embrace and set you free.**” The world says that’s crazy thinking. Jesus says it is where you will find true life - letting God take care of you and then marching in Jesus’ parade of life. Jesus invites us to give ourselves away with him.

Where is your mind set today, on human things or on Godly things? If your intention is to “**get a little religion**”, then you’re missing out on the life God has in store for you. If instead, you are **resting your life, hopes and dreams safely in the loving arms of God**, you are marching in Jesus’ parade. Jesus is God. Jesus died and rose again. Then Jesus came back and now leads God’s parade of life. And for God’s people, followers of Jesus, now is the **time to walk the talk. Jesus is Lord. We are Jesus’ followers. So, what are the Lord and his followers going to do?**

Jesus' parade is an ongoing journey. There are decisions to be made every day. Do you live by some set of easy **rules** – "**I have to do thus and so to keep my tail out of hell?**" Or do you live out of a love, trust **relationship** with God? "**I want to do this because God loves me and this is one way that I can love God back.**" Are you **doing the minimum in order to get saved?** You'll never make it. Or, are you **generously giving yourself away because you are already saved?** The sky is the limit. The more you risk, the more that you discover you have...

Our being here this morning has something to do with being in Jesus' parade to eternity. Our faith family has been through some challenging times as we have sought to be God's hands and feet here in this place. Lots of the marchers, those who have worked hard to love and care for those who are a part of this church are growing older. Lots of those who have been strong in reaching out to care for our community and world are growing weaker. **We need to grow the numbers in our ranks.**

Nobody is too old to serve. Our oldest members, residents in Aitkin senior care centers are daily praying for the young people who are their aides, nurses and caregivers. They are seeing the difficult circumstances that our young people are facing. They are praying that God might be able to bring light, life and hope to ease their burdens. They are praying for God to give these young people eternal joy, deep and rich – starting right now. They are praying that these young friends might realize how much Jesus loves them. That they might let Jesus help and walk with them – right now.

Nobody is too young to serve. We've got little kids who are bringing their families to Jesus. We've got teens who are volunteering in the church office, helping with the nursery and mentoring younger kids. We've got busy parents who are teaching Sunday school and serving on the church council.

I had the privilege of helping to baptize my grandson **Anders John Pedersen** last Sunday. As I stood before the large congregation at Trinity Lutheran Church in Moorhead, I spoke these words. "**This little girl,**" pointing at my daughter-in-law, Maisi, I said, "**was raised in the faith by God's people in Winona, Minnesota.**" Pointing at my son, John, I said, "**This little boy was raised in the faith by God's people in Littlefork,**

Minnesota.” Turning to the congregation, I said, **“Thank you for being the people of God in Moorhead, Minnesota who are taking on the responsibility to raise my grandson Anders in God’s love and care.”** We make that promise to God and to little ones here too don’t we?

Simple thing... We can **hoard our life**. Or we can **give it away**. The world says, **“Hoard!”** Jesus says, **“Give it away.”** **“... Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”**

Simple thing... Yesterday a few folks served a **funeral lunch** for a family. The funeral was for someone from Alaska. None of the servers knew the fellow. Yet through their simple sharing of food and hospitality Jesus touched those strangers with the love of God. Those servers gave themselves away and God blessed them and their efforts to give life. Visitors here often comment on **how beautiful this church’s sanctuary is**. **Even more beautiful** here, I am convinced; are **this church’s people** when we are being the **hands and feet of God**.

Simple thing... A sophomore confirmation student is asking that some of us jot down a **little note of faith encouragement or wisdom** that she can share with her peers on their confirmation day. The sheets are on the table by the entrance.

Simple things... We need more **funeral lunch servers**, **Wednesday supper servers**, **Sunday school teachers**, and more **folks to watch little ones in the nursery** during worship and other events that we long to have young families attend. We need more **confirmation mentors**, **new member sponsors**, people to serve on **ministry teams** like Global Missions, Altar Guild, Stewardship, Finance... We need **more money** in the offering plates to support all of this. We need **more prayers** that we might be **doing Jesus’ faithful, life-giving work** amongst the young families, seniors, disenfranchised, lonely, hurting, grieving, hungry and broken-hearted of this community... **“Those who lose their life for my sake will find it...”**

We can sit and grumble about how the younger generation has gotten soft, doesn’t know how to take responsibility, or is only looking out for themselves. Or, we can stand shoulder to shoulder with them in the midst of their struggles, hurts and needs. Our young people may need to

experience love, service and generosity from us before they can be motivated to share the same with others.

Next Sunday we are going to worship together here at 9:00 a.m. and then we are going to walk together, shoulder to shoulder, out into this town to try and make a small but Godly difference – “**God’s Work. Our Hands.**” Did you sign up to help? Hopefully that action will be just a foretaste, a little glimpse of where we are headed as First Lutheran faith family following Jesus in the year ahead.

Simple things. We are celebrating **Labor Day weekend**. How can your labors, work, **job be done for Christ**, to the glory of God? Can the love of God be seen through your **garden** - care for the earth, precious food raised, zucchini shared down the block with someone too old to garden or too young to have the time to plant and nurture? **Is that following Jesus?**

How are you **planning to serve alongside of Jesus** during the year ahead? Tear off a little chunk of your bulletin and write something on it. Put down something that you will do to make a **Godly difference in this church or world**. Nursery care, Wednesday supper helper, usher... Invite someone to worship, share a ride, drop off some food... Write something down and if you really want to do this, add your name and phone number so we can plug you in. **Name or not**, put your slip in the offering plate as a part of **giving yourself away** as a partner with Jesus. “**Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.**” That’s what Jesus said. I believe it. Do you?

Right here and now, we are **God’s people marching in Jesus’ life-giving parade to eternity. Lord only knows where Jesus might be bringing you and me... But, Lord willing, it will be good.** Thanks be to God. Amen.