

**Sunday, September 3, 2017 – 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**“Can You Handle the Truth?”**

Matthew 16: 21-28

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Story Interrupted Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Last week’s sermon flows into this one. In case your memory is a bit foggy or you weren’t here, we were with Jesus and His disciples as they zeroed in on the answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” We dismissed incomplete and unsatisfying answers about Him being the truth-teller stand-up-for-the-little-guy humanitarian John the Baptist, the point-everyone-to-the-end Elijah or the depressed and suffering martyr type like Jeremiah. Jesus’ disciple Peter gets the answer right – Jesus is the Christ – the One anointed with oil as the G.O.A.T prophet/priest/king all rolled into one. Homerun. Full on truth.

We’ve heard the truth – Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. We know what that means, don’t we? When you’re the G.O.A.T, you’re honored. Thousands and tens of thousands line up to see your induction ceremony. You get your plaque. Your brand is a top seller decades after you retire. Everyone after you is compared to you and no matter how great, they show respect. That’s the kind of honor and glory we expect for the yardstick by which every other prophet, priest or king is compared – the very standard of perfection in each, the Christ.

Put yourself in the disciples’ shoes. They’ve been traveling with their Teacher now for some time. They’ve seen increasingly incredible things. He has taught with authority, He has healed, He has cast out demons, He has raised people from the dead, He has power over wind and waves. He \*just\* said He would build His church on the confession that Peter made that He was the Christ. There has been opposition along the way but the trajectory is shooting up. And now Jesus is confirming this most incredible statement of truth as true!

You’re in the inner circle. What do you see? You probably see vindication – against all those people who told you that you were a fool to drop everything and follow Him. You probably see fame and fortune. You probably see favor and respect from others, and wealthy fathers arranging the marriage of their lovely daughters. You see Israel raising an army and victory in war. You see prominent political appointments for yourself. You see servants and attendants

and a carefree life and to top it all off none of these dreams are seedy or underhanded because you're along for the ride with the Son of God. Let the good times roll!

And right as their imaginations are picking up speed Jesus slams on the brake and veers you off onto a crazy, unexpected and horrifying turn. Matthew says, "From then Jesus began to show His disciples." What did He show? Going to Jerusalem, yes – but suffering many things and being killed. Peter can't believe his ears. Peter just spoke truth to Jesus and got blessed for it. And when Jesus spoke even more truth back, we found out Peter can't handle the truth! For Peter "Christ," that is, the G.O.A.T prophet/priest/king and "suffering" are two words that don't belong in the same sentence.

The truth is, you and I say we want the truth, but you can't handle the truth, either. God doesn't operate the way we expect God to work in the world. Did you find yourself wondering how a loving God could allow the devastation of Hurricane Harvey this week? Have you ever shook your fist toward Heaven and asked "Why?!" after a devastating loss? Is it maddening to think that God would have standards for how people live and how they love against the conventional wisdom in the culture and puts you and your perspective on the "outs?" Is it foolish for God to be so blasted inefficient at getting His saving Word out there, and using such unconvincing means – dusty books and out of touch pastors and Christians – to try to tell people about Jesus and what He has done? Meanwhile the chances of war ratchet up, and people fight and hate for terribly superficial reasons and injustice spreads and suffering goes up. Where's the kingdom, and power, and glory? No one in their heart of hearts wants a suffering Christ, a dying Christ, a cross bearing Christ, a life losing Christ.

The truth is that you can't handle the truth. Peter can't handle the truth. In fact, only Jesus can handle the truth. He'll speak these words a few more times before He goes through with what He has predicted – the suffering and the dying, the denying Himself – all that power and pomp and circumstances – the cross bearing, complete with clownish, mocking crown, the life losing. That goes for the suffering in your life too – there's a phantom "Bible verse," that goes like this – "God won't give you more than you can handle." That's complete and utter untruth. We get more than we can handle every single day. It's why we need Jesus.

Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." The path of the Christ, isn't an upward trajectory toward wine, women and song. It's plummeting into feeding trough set on a manure caked floor. It's having nowhere to lay down His head. It's brutal beatings, a thorn-cutting crown, spiteful spit in the face, stinging sweat. It's abandonment by His friends and His Father. His disciples can expect the same. Eleven of his twelve would be martyrs. Even if we aren't killed for our faith, we see death and disease, disasters and depression all around and like Peter, we can't handle the truth. Surely God would be merciful? That's a better translation of what Peter said to Jesus, "God be merciful to you Lord! This will not be you!"

The Father was not merciful to Jesus. The Father sent Jesus to show mercy to you. He saw that you and I are up to our necks in too much truth that we can't handle, the death and disease, disaster and depression in your family and in your body and on the news and the right way – the only way for God to have mercy on you was for Jesus to take up His cross. And we follow behind with ours, not to earn the forgiveness and life that Jesus already won for us, but walking as Jesus' disciples in our own times of unhandleable death and disease, disasters and depressions to know that no matter what we appear to lose on this side of Heaven, the way of the Christ doesn't end at the cross.

Truth is, it's too much truth. It's too much for me and it's too much for you. Only Jesus' suffering, dying and rising will equip us to take up our cross and follow Him. The Christ, the Son of the living God, the G.O.A.T prophet/priest/king wrestled the bear of all that unhandled truth and HANDLED it. When you are hunted down by death and disease, disaster or depression and look to Jesus, know that Jesus handled those things for you. He walks with you. He leads His people. He helps us look beyond ourselves to love.

I think of those folks in Houston, so many who've suffered so much. One of my Facebook friends is a pastor in Klein, a suburb of Houston. His own house was filled with three feet of standing water due to Harvey. I saw their pictures. He and his wife have been transparent about their own devastation over this disaster. Yet within 24 hours of the flood they were manning a command center at their church arranging the rescue of their neighbors. He shared on Facebook to update people who've been sending in financial support for their efforts,

“Rescued 39 families; sheltered 33 individuals and 15 first responders; ministered to 194 families; watched rooms get filled with supplies that have gone out into emergency shelters; seen over 400 people give over 16,000 volunteer hours to people they don't even know!... After worship last night it was amazing to hear a person who was displaced say, ‘I am not sure what's ahead... but Jesus does and He's got me.’”

In times that overwhelm our ability to handle, that truth really matters.

And friends, remember – Jesus has already handled the truth. He's already won victory and He is coming again. When that happens, we'll see something a lot bigger and better than Peter and the disciples' best daydreams can offer. In Jesus' name, Amen.