

+++ In the Name of Jesus +++

Date: August 30, 2026 (14th Sunday after Pentecost, series A) (Proper 17)

Title: “The Second Mountain”

Text: Matthew 16:24-26

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, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to You!’

²³ 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 man.’

²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father’s glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what they have done.

²⁸ ‘Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.’

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It happened a few weeks ago in Whistler. My friend Tim and I turned a corner (me running, him on his bike) and we started up a big hill, adjusting our pace accordingly (by which I mean, slowing down) as we ground our way up that big hill toward the summit. *But then*, just as we started to reach it, we realized there was *a second* peak right behind it, that we hadn’t been able to see at first. We weren’t as “done” as we thought... or hoped we were.

The writer David Brooks makes that sort of experience a key image in one of his recent books, called *The Second Mountain*. The copy I ordered hasn’t come yet, but from what I gather, Brooks lays out quite a compelling case that what each of us need to do is to *keep on going* along life’s way, and climb what he calls our *second* mountain.

The *first* mountain is the obvious one that most of us modern North Americans already tackle. It’s the mountain of outward success. We climb that mountain by finishing our schooling, then “starting at the bottom” of our career and gradually working our way up. Along the way, we pass common milestones everyone agrees are significant: “upward steps” in terms of our income, social status, and “stuff.” As we get close to the top of this first mountain, some of us even start to dream about personal “bucket-lists” of all the places we’d like to visit and all the experiences we’d like to collect, as we see the ground starting to level out ahead of us. We figure we’re almost *there*, at that point; we’ve pretty much arrived!

What we discover, though, as we come close to cresting that mountain, is that there’s *another* mountain right behind it. We’re *not* actually done, after all! Only when we carry on to reach the top of that *second* mountain, will our journey through life *really* be finished. In particular, David Brooks identifies 4 challenges that he says make up this “second mountain”:

commitment to a spouse and family... a meaningful vocation...

deep and well-formed faith... and participation in a wider community.

Real success in life (Brooks says) depends on how well we accept, and master, those four commitments that lie *beyond* the more obvious markers of success that make up the *first* mountain.

Well. As you and I reflect on today’s Gospel reading, it shouldn’t surprise us to learn that David Brooks is a Christian. His book about “the second mountain” is not a *specifically* Christian work; nor it is

addressed to Christians *only*. Yet what he was really doing (when he wrote that book) was expanding on what we heard Jesus tell his disciples in the second part of our reading from Matthew 16: **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”** (Matt 16:24-26)

When Jesus’s first disciples heard those words, they had already been doing a pretty good job of climbing their “first mountain.” In fact, they probably thought they were getting pretty close to the top, after everything they had already accomplished.

- Right at the start of Matthew’s Gospel (back in chapter 4), as soon as Jesus *called* Peter and Andrew, James and John, to **“come, follow him”**—boom, they did so! **“Immediately, they left their boats, and their nets, and their father, and followed him.”** (4:18-22)
- Then, in chapters 5 to 7, Jesus taught *all* of his first disciples many things about what it *meant* to follow him. The Sermon on the Mount gave them a wonderful “Master’s Class” in what God’s powerful Word means for everyday life.
- Then, in chapter 10, Jesus gave his 12 closest disciples **“authority to drive out unclean spirits, and to heal every disease and sickness.”** (10:1-5) That was sort of like their first “hands-on” experience in their *apprenticeship* program—the first time those disciples received both the *tools* and the *opportunity* to *do* what they had been watching Jesus do, for quite a while.
- Then, three chapters later (in Matthew 13), Jesus taught his disciples a whole chapter’s worth of parables—and when he asked them at the end of that chapter, **“Have you understood all this?”** they were confident enough to quickly say, **“Yes!”** (13:51)

It’s true, if we read Matthew’s Gospel carefully, that these disciples’ performance had not always been absolutely stellar at *every* point. They had made many mistakes along the way, and sometimes tripped and stumbled pretty badly. But by and large, most of us readers of Matthew’s Gospel would probably agree that these disciples had been making *good* progress (*up to* this point) in climbing that *first* mountain Jesus had challenged them with, when he called them *to be* his disciples.

Today, though, we are seeing the very moment when Jesus tells these men to *look up*, and start taking “this *second* mountain” seriously. It’s quite a different mountain than the first one.

So far, you see, their path of discipleship had been a process of *adding*, and *gaining*, and *climbing up higher*.

- They added this little bit of understanding *here*, and that little bit of knowledge *there*.
- They crossed *this* difficult ridge (of *this* experience), and climbed *that* looming height (of *that* experience).

What Jesus was telling them *now*, though, was changing the whole profile of their journey, completely.

- Instead of *arriving*, they were only just part-way along!
- Instead of getting ready to *ease off*, they were facing another big challenge!

In fact, this *further* journey Jesus was *now* calling them to join him in, was not a path that was going to take them *higher* at all (from glory to glory). It was a path that plunged *down* from all the heights they had already attained, into the depths. *That*, Jesus said, is what life as his disciple is *really* all about. It is not a matter of riding a wave of success (from one social-media-summit to the next). Rather, following Jesus means turning your back on all of that, and shouldering a cross. It’s a life of self-denial, and self-sacrifice.

How far was Jesus himself willing to go, to master this second mountain? Well, back in our Old Testament reading, the prophet Jeremiah gave us a glimpse of what this “path of suffering” was going to look like, for whoever God finally sent to be our Saviour. **“I never sat in the company of revelers,”** Jeremiah said (not only describing himself, but pointing ahead to the coming Christ); **“I never made merry with them. I sat alone, because your hand [O Lord] was on me, and you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unending, and my wound grievous and incurable?”** (Jer 15:17-18) When the right time came, Jesus magnified all of that, a hundred-fold—plunging down from an even-higher height than Jeremiah ever reached, to an even-deeper depth than any of us will ever endure. As our Saviour prophesied in the opening verse of our Gospel reading, **“He was going to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law, and be killed—and, on the third day, be raised to life.”** (Matt 16:21)

The reason Jesus did all of that, of course, was for us. He **“denied himself and took up his cross”** so that God could count *his* self-sacrifice as the payment-in-full for all of our failures. As St. John says in his first letter, **“Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins—and not only for ours, but for the sins of the whole world.”** (1 John 2:2) That payment Jesus made, *for us*, *never* has to be repeated by anyone! And in that sense, there is *no need at all* for any of *us* to “climb *any* mountain” or “conquer *any* height” by our own sweaty effort. We have *already* “arrived” in the kingdom of God, because of what Jesus has done in our place. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, **“We have [already] come to Mt. Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the city of the living God, to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, [and] to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.”** (Hebrews 12:22-23)

What Jesus achieved by going down so *low*, was *our* elevation—to the highest heights of glory you and I could ever even dream of! Still, though, he *does* call us (here in this reading) to *tackle* this second mountain—to **“take up our own cross and follow him”**? (Matt 16:24) Why? Well—in his words, **“so we can find our life, by losing it”**... so we can **“hang onto our soul,”** by “letting go” of everything else. (25-26)

As you might have noticed, the translation we’re using here today describes what Jesus is calling us to focus on, using two different words: our **“life”** and our **“soul.”** Curiously, there’s only just one Greek word (ψυχή) that lies behind both of those English terms.

- Translating ψυχή as **“life”** puts the emphasis on our whole existence, in kind of a yes-or-no fashion: Are we alive, or not?
- Translating that same word (ψυχή) as **“soul”** shifts the emphasis onto the spiritual realm, where it describes not only life-as-a-whole, here-and-now, but also our *eternal* existence as creatures who enjoy a special kind of value in God’s sight that no other creature enjoys.

We *ought* to be willing to give up our *life*, Jesus says (everything we do, achieve, and enjoy, on life’s first mountain—in order to hang onto our *soul* (which is the one part of our being that *will* endure with God in heaven forever).

All of that, you see, is what makes up this “second mountain” that Jesus lifts up our eyes to aim for. Is there still a *certain* kind of value in all of life’s *other* goals?—education, career, wealth, and status? Of course! But for us who follow Jesus, there’s more—so much more! As he himself showed in *his* life, the way to attain that “*more*” is actually to have *less*. That’s why following him requires us also to **“deny ourselves... take up our cross... and follow him.”** (24) None of those steps lead us any higher at all, in terms of our *life*: that is, the obvious, “first-mountain” milestones of social, cultural, and economic

success. But all three of these steps certainly do nurture our *soul*: that is, this *second* mountain that Jesus was calling not only Peter and the rest of his original disciples, to aim for, but you and me too.

I wonder about the ways *you* have already started to discover, and climb, this second mountain. In particular, the 4 goals David Brooks describes in his book are a pretty good sketch of what it means to follow Jesus, too.

The first goal is *commitment to a spouse and family*. Well, some of us are married, and some of us aren't. If we are, we ought to be placing more emphasis *on* our spouse and family than on any of our other relationships. But whether we have an “earthly family” or not, you and I certainly do belong to the family of God—the household of the church. And here in *this* church, I see many of you reaching out to your fellow church-members with love, and care, and support—commitments that go well beyond most of our “normal,” first-mountain commitments to people who are outside our own family. It is not just a “pious dream” at all, to call each other brother and sister in Christ.

The second goal Brooks mentions is *vocation*—by which he means, meaningful work. Many of you, I know, are enjoying the gift of retirement, which is (of course) all about giving up *ordinary* work. Vocation, though, is different from ordinary work; it's not just a job, it's a calling. So, serving on church council, or a service team... or praying your way through our church directory, or praying for the people on our weekly prayer list... or volunteering to help and serve others in the wider community too—all these things are ways of adding value to other people's lives, in ways that will last forever. *Meaningful vocation!*

Brooks's third goal is *faith*. In some ways, like life itself, faith is a “yes-or-no proposition”: either we have it or we don't! But *when* we have it, its strength and character are able to *grow*—ideally, our whole life long. So, how is *your* faith growing? We've got 3 new classes starting-up in the next few weeks, to *help* your faith grow: a Bible study on worship (on Sunday mornings)... GriefShare (on Wednesday mornings)... and a study I'm really looking forward to, “A Christian Perspective on Climate Change” (on Thursday mornings). Why don't you pick one (or two, or even all three) and come and join us?

Finally, the fourth goal that can help us climb life's second mountain is *community*: connecting with others. This is a tough one, these days, not only because we naturally drift away from others as we age, but also because there are so many social factors right now that are *driving* us apart. Again, the church is a terrific “antidote” to all of that social division! You and I meet here together, around Jesus—wherever we come from in life, whatever our background is, and whatever political parties or positions we line ourselves up with. Getting involved in the wider community outside these doors is also super important! So I urge you to forge as many of those links too, as you can. But *this* community right here—the body of Christ—both can and should be our *first* community, beyond our family. As St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “**You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it.**” (1 Cor 12:27)

Happy climbing! It isn't *easy* to tackle life's second mountain—not in the world out there, nor here in the church. Our Saviour's call to “**deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him**” is always daunting—especially compared to all those rewards of wealth, success, and status that we get so used to enjoying as we climb life's *first* mountain. But as Jesus says, it is only in the course of “**losing our life, for him, that we will truly find it.**” (25)

God grant us the vision, courage, and will, to follow our Saviour along *that* path, all the way *up*—and all the way *home*. Amen.