

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." ³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

In Nomine Jesu

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I don't want anyone to misunderstand what I'm about to say. I'm grateful beyond measure that we are part of the Christian family that baptizes infants. I'm a huge fan for lots of reasons. Even though lots of folks think we're guilty of "bait and switch" practices because we baptize infants. "They don't have any choice in the matter," critics say. And we say, "That's the whole point! It's God's way of sharing saving grace with those who can't yet choose." "I'm pledging my grace to them forever ... regardless," is God's promise.

And then we hear today's text where Jesus does all this "taking up our cross" talk. It sounds like anything but "grace, peace, love, and joy" language. Just listen to this if you missed it:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Still sounds a lot like "bait and switch" to some. Sounds like unless I'm suffering somehow, I can't be really sure that God's on my side ... like if it's going well for me, something's wrong with my relationship with God. Sounds like ... well, confusing.

Well, the purpose of this sermon is to clear up any of that confusion. And the best way I know to clear it up is to remind us all that each of the two ecumenical creeds we use in public worship – the Apostles' and the Nicene – have three sections ... we call them "Articles." Here's what each of them deals with:

Article One ... Everything that exists, including us, exists because of God's creative power and God wants it to.

- Article Two ... We've all got a sin problem that we can't get ourselves out of. Only God can do that ... through Jesus.
- Article Three ... The way God chooses to do that is through faith, and that's the Holy Spirit's job. We get faith not because we work on it, but as a gift through the Holy Spirit ... and one of the ways that happens is through Holy Baptism ... and that's the only way God promises to do that for infants.

And now we're back to where we started. Infant baptism. And how infants have no choice in the matter. That's true, by definition, I guess. It's God's way of choosing them. But we need to hear really clearly what sounded like "bait and switch."

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Did you hear that? **"If any want to become my followers,"** - It says **"if."** It says **"want."** And it doesn't invite choices about or set up hurdles to "being saved." God's taken care of that ... remember the creed summary? What our text does is to invite choice for us about "becoming [Jesus'] followers." Becoming disciples. And that's a whole different thing from being saved.

Folks that teach others about the Bible say that the difference we're talking about is the difference between "salvation" and "sanctification." It's the difference between how God welcomes us into the family of eternal promise – **"salvation"** – and what we do with that as part of God's family – **"sanctification."** It's kind of like "Here's my gift to you" – "salvation" – "heading for heaven" and "Here's what you can choose to do in response to that gift" – "sanctification" – "taking up the cross" – while you're waiting for God's promise of heaven for you to happen

And, by the way, that "cross" doesn't have anything to do your or my "suffering" ... it's about Jesus' suffering and death and his gift to us of forgiveness, life, and salvation. The clue for that? The verses that follow all that "taking up the cross" talk say this:

³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

And the problem for us is whether we really believe God's promise or not. Here's an example: If you've been a Lutheran for any length of time at all and heard the phrase ... "we're saved by grace, through faith, for the sake of Jesus Christ" ... you'd all be ready to say "that's right!" ... God does it, not us, when it comes to getting to heaven.

But if you've ever gone to a funeral or to a funeral home visitation for a departed friend or loved one and listened to the conversation around you, one way or another you'd

hear someone – not unlikely a grieving Lutheran – say, “She’s gone, but not forgotten and we know God will keep her in heaven – he lived a truly good life – made a lot of difference for others.”

That’s only a step away from those Jesus is talking about who “want to save their life” – want to **do** the saving for themselves rather than “letting God be God ... be the saver and the giver.” I’m convinced that what Jesus is reminding us is simply “when it comes to getting to heaven,

those who want to save their life will lose.

It’s not about racking up points on the “get to heaven meter” for a “God who’s keeping score” to decide who gets in and who doesn’t. It’s about how you “bear the good news for all of Jesus’ cross.” It’s about how you do that for any and all you live with, encounter, and love that’s the difference. It’s how we “follow him” in our lives “for the sake of the world” that God loved so much that he gave the gift of Jesus that it’s about.

A while back I was at our Bishop’s office in Tampa for a meeting of our Synod Council. I had been elected to serve on that group – kind of like our “Congregation Council” but for the whole synod in Florida and the Bahamas, all 180 plus congregations in that turf. It was only last Fall that my service with that team ended. And at that meeting we heard a wonderful devotion on a theme that’s another angle on our text. The leader pointed out that ...

The church exists for the sake of the world. It’s God’s mission for the sake of the world. God so loved the world ... ! [it doesn’t say “the church” so sometimes church needs to give itself up for the sake of the world.]

Wow! That’s another way of making today’s point ... getting rid of the confusion and getting a clear focus on God’s plan. If we keep our eyes glued on what’s going on just here at Nativity and trying to make sure that Nativity keeps on keepin’ on with whatever got us here in the first place and whatever we’ve learned to love, we’ve got our eyes on the wrong prize.

One of my early Sundays here I did a Children’s sermon this way. I invited all the kids to come up front and as they were getting there I asked them to make a circle and join their hands as a way of showing everybody else how God wants the church to be.

100% of the time – never failed [well, once it did when somebody had heard this before] – but almost absolutely all the time they’d get to the front and they’d join hands making a circle looking at each other. And I said something like “wow, that’s really great! You’re reminding us all that God gives us the gift of church in our baptisms so that we can be a close family in the church.” But then I said something like, “but that’s not the way of holding hands to show everybody else how God wants the church to be.”

I heard some grumbling and maybe griping from folks, but then I said ... "that's the way God got things started, but what God wants us – and our text calls us – to be is this: I want you to let go of the hands you're holding, turn all the way around, and grab hands again." And then I clapped my hands and said with joy, "Now you've got it right! God gives us the gift of being God's family not just so that we can enjoy and take care of and be partners together in the church ... looking at each other ... but so that we can turn around and let the church do the same thing for the whole world.

And why can we do that? ... what makes that way of joining hands God's way? Well, it's because we know the truth of God's saving love for each of us in Jesus Christ, in his suffering and death and resurrection for us. And now we get the joy of facing not just the rest of the family in the church, but turning around and facing and embracing and engaging the world for all those same reasons. To enjoy and take care of and be God's partners in service to and for the world. We're freed to do that, because we know God's love and plan for us is secure.

One last point about our text. All the writers of the first three Gospels in the Bible have this story as part of what they wrote. But only the writer of Mark's Gospel includes these words

for the sake of the gospel

And here's where the writer places those words ... in this sentence:

those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

What looks to lots of folk in the world like we're "losing our lives" compared to what they think the winning life ought to look like, is in fact "saving our lives" when we know what the truth about God's gift to us is ... and can live for others ... for the world that God loves so much ... and do it all "for the sake of the gospel."

It's to that for which we are called in our baptism ...

...in the Name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit. And let the people say:

AMEN!

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Soli Deo Gloria