

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES - 2021

September 12, 2021

Pentecost 16

Mark 8:27-38

National Bishop Susan Johnson

Grace to you and peace in the name of our lord and saviour Jesus Christ.

And greetings to you from your siblings in Christ from coast to coast to coast that make up this family of God that we call the ELCIC.

I have often struggled with this text, and let me share a little bit with you why. It's really verses 34 and 35:

8:34 - *He 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.*

8:35 - *For 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.*

"Take up your cross." It certainly doesn't seem like a pleasure cruise, does it? Maybe I'm a little chicken sometimes, but I don't really think that's what bothers me about this text. I think what bothers me is the way sometimes that it's been misused.

One way that it's been misused is some people think that this call to take up your cross is a call to martyrdom. A call to die as part of your faith. And I believe very strongly that is not the case.

We do lift up and honour those who have been martyred for their faith because of the example of their discipleships and their commitment to live a life following Jesus. But we never celebrate their deaths. We mourn their deaths because of the oppressive systems that they lived that caused their persecution and death.

We also recommit ourselves to work to end oppression and injustice in our world in response to the example of the martyrs.

This gospel also gets misused by those who would preach a gospel of prosperity, because they define taking up your cross in a very specific way, namely to live a very pure and moral life, that in return you'll be rewarded with riches here on earth as well as in heaven. If you colour within all the lines, where you will be rewarded with wealth, and health, a good job, a great family, promotions and who knows what else. And that's not right. That's not what the gospel promises us. In fact, I think it's heretical.

Another way it gets twisted is by trying to use what sounds like a hard road to water down what the expectations of Christianity are, to some kind of "Christianity lite." And that is certainly not what God is calling us to.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr in the faith, has written about this in his book "The Cost of Discipleship," and I just want to read one very brief passage:

"If our Christianity has ceased to be serious about discipleship, if we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift, which makes no costly demands, and which fails to distinguish between natural and Christian existence, then we cannot help regarding the cross as an ordinary everyday calamity, as one of the trials and tribulations of life. We have then forgotten that the cross means rejection and shame as well as suffering."

And indeed, that is very much what Jesus experienced.

I think the call to take up our cross and follow Jesus is a call to discipleship – and I think it means living life through the filter of loving God and loving one's neighbour.

I think this is what we are called to do in all aspects of our life. In our work, in our volunteer time, in our church community and our wider community, in how we care for the Earth and how we spend our money, and how we choose to use our time and the choices we make about purchasing or not purchasing...all of these things, everything that we do in our life, needs to come through the lens of that filter.

Jesus gave us many examples of people who lived costly lives of discipleship.

For example, the story of the widow who went into the temple and gave her all, her one *mite* - a very small coin, but all she had - for praise and honour and love of God.

Or the story of the woman who lost one coin, searched and searched, and upon finding it was so happy that she threw a party for all her neighbours to celebrate with her. In trying to save that one coin, she spent a whole bunch of money on throwing a party. It's a sign of our call to seek for those that are lost, in terms of their physical and emotional and spiritual needs, but also to be lavish in our hospitality.

Or the wonderful story about the father who receives the return of his son who has gone rogue, or prodigal, and welcomes him with wide open loving arms, and forgiveness and hospitality and

generosity. Who places a robe upon him, a ring on his finger, and throws him a party and promises him more because he is so happy his son is alive and back with him. The son wasn't entitled to that, he'd already received half of his father's estate - what was owed to him - but this is the sign of God's working and God's ways - the cost of discipleship.

Or the story of the Samaritan man who found the Jewish man beaten up on the side of the road, attended to his needs and took him farther to a place where he would be taken care of, and paid for that care.

It's going that extra mile, in all that we do in life. I'm not saying the life of discipleship is easy - it's challenging, and it's a muscle that we need to exercise and grow into.

That's why we're doing this four-year emphasis on Living our Faith. We've spent three years really focusing on strengthening our relationship with God, because that is what is going to help us get to year four.

In year one we looked at prayer, and year two we looked at reading scripture, and right now we're starting a year of focusing on our devotional life and our worship life, but in year four, a year from now, we'll be looking at how we live out love in action, in all aspects of our lives.

Taking up your cross is not always easy. It sometimes means being willing to take a stand that is not popular and receiving criticism for it. It's being willing to stand up for a classmate who's being bullied in school, or to speak for the co-worker who's being harassed or subjected to micro-aggressions because of gender, or gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation, or race, or differing abilities. It's being willing to make costly decisions to give something to that person who's going by your car yet one more time with a hat out, to volunteering at a food bank, or saying maybe we don't need a new car this year and let's use the money that we would have spent in terms of helping with this or that.

Or it means carefully thinking about your values and what's important in your life as you prepare to vote in this upcoming federal election.

It's about how we live all aspects of our life together, and there are consequences to those actions.

I read a tweet by someone named Carlos A. Rodríguez. I've never seen one of his tweets before but this really struck me. He said:

*There are no conditions on "Love Thy Neighbour."
There are no addendums to "Welcome The Stranger."
There are zero amendments to "The Golden Rule."
And if we're wrong, let's err on the side of inclusion and love.
Always, love.*

The reality is that we are marked out for this life of discipleship, this life of taking up our cross to follow Jesus in our baptisms, right at the start of our life of faith. We are splashed with water

three times in the name of the trinity. We are then signed with the mark of the cross of Christ on our foreheads, and then anointed and sealed with the holy spirit. But that marking with the cross means something. It's right here on our foreheads. It's where we lead from, where we walk out from, and we don't always remember it; we don't see it when we look in the mirror, but maybe we should. It's what we are called to do, what we are called to be - disciples.

The good news is, first of all, we are not alone in this. We know and we are promised that God is with us always, in our joys and in our sorrows, at times when carrying that cross gets very difficult.

We know that we have been called into a community, the faith community that surrounds us, to help us discern where and how Christ is calling us, both individually and then together, but also to help us when things get difficult, to bear the burdens and to continue to follow Jesus.

So that means the world to me. And I hope it means the world to you too.

At the beginning of this lesson when Peter becomes the hero and says 'you are the Messiah', and in other places along with that Jesus said 'yes, you're faithful and on you I will build my church', the reality is that just a few minutes later, here's Peter rebuking Jesus for prophesying about his death and suffering and resurrection. And Peter, we know, goes on when Jesus was arrested to deny him three times. But Peter still is the foundation on which Christ builds his church. Christ knows that even though we are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus, we will inevitably stumble. And the thing is, we are in a covenant relationship with God which will not change when we stumble, or when we falter, or when we get scared or when it's too hard, or anything.

God loves us unconditionally and promises us life abundant, now and into the future. And again, that promise that we will never be alone, that God's presence is always with us, surrounding us and supporting us.

So let's take courage from these things and let's strike out again in terms of taking up our cross and following Jesus.

You know, this really isn't such a scary passage after all.

God bless you in your journey of discipleship. Amen.