

Sermon on Luke 14:35-33  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 4, 2016  
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace...

Have you ever considered what a strange symbol the cross is for our Christian faith? I mean, when most people seek to symbolize what has the most meaning for them in their lives, or their aspirations and identity, they choose more positive images. Like in the military, the flag is a powerful symbol of our country, that unites troops and reminds them of what they are fighting for. The American eagle is also a symbol of power – in fact, the ancient Romans also used the eagle as their symbol throughout the empire, carried by their legions. (Benjamin Franklin first suggested the “turkey” as our national symbol – I wonder what would be the message if it were the American symbol today?) Professional and college sports teams use animal mascots or other symbols of power – though today there is still controversy over some choices for sports team symbols that are inappropriate, such as the Washington *Redskins*. Still, nations, organizations and groups of people choose symbols that are usually positive and inviting to portray themselves to the world.

We Christians have the *cross* as symbol for our faith. Jesus invited his disciples to follow him on the path that leads to *life forever*, and we have chosen a symbol that means *death* – an excruciatingly painful death for a slave, a traitor or a revolutionary. How inviting is that? I don't think your average communications specialist or Madison Avenue ad agency would come up with that.

So what does the cross mean to you? Have you thought about that lately? I mean, since Holy Week and Good Friday, when we focus a lot on the betrayal, suffering, and death of Jesus. After that one week of reality, often the crosses we display or wear are beautiful artistic renderings, like a 24-karat gold cross necklace marked with expensive diamonds, or the crosses decorated with beautiful lilies on Easter. The eye-pleasing floral crosses are the ones we share as gifts, or choose for the front of a condolences card we give for funerals. Not that rough-hewn, wooden cross that was carried by Jesus through Jerusalem to his death, assisted by Simon of Cyrene.

Today we have two powerful passages from scripture that lay out the great paradox of our faith: in the invitation to discipleship following Jesus, and new life forever, versus the *cost of discipleship* and the reality of carrying the cross! How is it possible to *choose life* by carrying the cross?

The first passage is from the book of Deuteronomy. The setting is a sermon preached by Moses to the Israelites before they entered the promised land after 40

years of wandering in the wilderness. In hindsight, biblical scholars believe that this passage was written years later, when Israel was already in exile in a foreign land, and was really looking forward to the time when God would restore the people the land, and their long exile would end. But whether it was the first entrance into the land, or their return many generations later, the message is the same: that the people were offered a *choice*. To walk in God's ways and obey the commandments, so that they could live in that land promised to them, or to disobey the commandments and follow other gods, and thus perish. Moses, or whatever faith leaders wrote this, urged people of faith to: "*Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days.*" The choice is between life and death – the true and living God, or the false gods that may seem tempting to follow. So choose life, love God, and remain faithful, just as God is faithful to you.

When Jesus first called his disciples in Galilee, it was a pretty simple invitation: *follow me*. The promise? "I will make you fish for people" – Jesus said to simple fishermen, who intrigued, left their nets, their boats and families to follow Jesus throughout Galilee. They left behind their former lives for the possibility of a new life, and new understanding of God's realm that they would receive from Jesus. They did all this for a *promise of life!* They saw how good this promise was in the miracles of healing the Jesus did, and day by day they learned more about the life of faith in God from what Jesus taught them. But they had no idea that there would be a *cost to their discipleship*. To them, it was just a new miracle every day! But in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus began to fill them in about the reality of the coming cost.

It started with the great crowds that were following Jesus – because of his miracles, healings, and inspired preaching. The numbers were many, but how deep was their commitment to follow? On whom could Jesus rely? So Jesus confronted them with this: "*Whoever does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.*" Honestly, this is probably an exaggeration to make a point, called *hyperbole*, like a poet saying "I'd swim across the oceans for your love!" But Jesus' point was this: to truly follow Jesus, to the place he was going – Jerusalem, and his death – would take total commitment. Nothing halfway would do. His disciples would have to leave everything else behind, in order to follow. "*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*"

Each one of them would have to count the cost to follow. Jesus made an example of an architect in building a tower: you have to plan ahead and count the cost in order to know if you can actually build it (unless it is a *Trump Tower* – then the cost doesn't seem to matter!). It would be a shame to run out of money or

resources before the tower was built! Or what king or queen would enter into a war without comparing the numbers of troops and weapons you had with those of your adversaries? Would your 10,000 beat an army of 20,000? Not unless they are the Spartan 300! If you don't have the capacity, you had better negotiate and cut a deal for peace! If you are going into battle, you had better be "all in" – or forget it! So Jesus said, *"So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."* Not on this trip to Jerusalem!

I'll bet this cut into the numbers of the crowd following Jesus. Luke doesn't say if any left, and we do know that there was a nice crowd following Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday later on. But the crowd soon dwindled over Holy week, to the faithful few who shouted for him on Good Friday against the hostile mob before Pontious Pilate at Jesus' trial, and the even fewer who stood watching him die on the cross at the execution place called The Skull, along with two criminals.

Clearly, the cost for Jesus doing and saying what he did was death on a cross, the death reserved for rebels and slaves, a great humiliation for one thought by his followers to be the long-expected Messiah, the liberator of his people.

To make sense of this, we have to consider what Jesus' death and his rising from the dead accomplished. It meant that Jesus kept his faith in God throughout his ordeal, knowing full well what the cost would be, he endured through the cross all the way to his death, forgiving his executioners and calling out to God the Father, to see him as he was, suffering on that cross. But then, on the third day, Jesus was raised again to life, and so through him God won the victory of life and faith over sin and death! Jesus proved that by carrying his burden, the weight of the sins of the world on his shoulders, his cross – and keeping his faith in God – he was able to achieve that ultimate victory of life and faith. Thus the grace of God was achieved for all humankind, through the life, faith, death and raising of Jesus our Lord – grace which was by no means "cheap" – it had a great cost to Jesus!

As the famed German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said:

*"Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his life, and it is grace because it gives one the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of God's Son: 'you were bought at a price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon God's Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."* (*The Cost of Discipleship*)

Thankfully, the crosses we are called to bear are not the same as the one carried by Jesus, that of suffering and death for all humanity. You and I aren't

asked to save the world! But still, Jesus calls you and me to also carry the cross and follow him, in order to be disciples. So what does this mean for us?

What does carrying the cross mean to you? Is it carrying the weight of your own problems, your health issues, your strained relationships and those of others on your shoulders? Because Jesus talks about giving up possessions in order to follow him, mostly we relate carrying the cross to making sacrifices. What kind of sacrifices do you and I make in order to follow Jesus? Probably not many – outside of taking time on Sundays for worship, volunteering for the church or community, or giving our tithes and offerings. Most of these we don't consider "sacrificial giving", and they are hardly a burden.

But then, think of the word *sacrifice*. It's root is in the Latin word *sacra*, which means "sacred rites" in English. So a sacrifice is something holy, something godly, an action done in the name of faith in God. It might mean giving something up, or it may mean doing something positive as a witness for faith. Some sacrifices lead us to greater life – something done for others, for instance – and to a greater sense of purpose, community, life and joy. (On the contrary, as theologian David Lose says in his blog, some "sacrifices" lead to less life, or even death.)

So I don't think Jesus is saying to sacrifice all those things that give us joy, to give up everything that you like and enjoy or gives your life meaning, in order to follow him as a disciple. This would be absurd! However, I think this is how some Christians have understood this – to give up everything you enjoy, in order to follow Jesus! They make their life a miserable sacrifice of all things good, like a holy martyrdom! Hence, hardly anyone wants to do that! Like those ministers who taught people to give up card playing, movies and dancing – since when do such sacrifices have anything to do with faith? Some of you remember those days!

Actually, I believe that Jesus' call is to let go of those things that keep us from true life, that are harmful and self-defeating – like anxiety and worry over things you and I can't control, envy, jealousy and gossip over the lives of others. If cards, movies and dancing become addictive or compulsive, then let them go. But let go of selfishness and greed, the fear of failure, wanting to control others, seeking perfection, or wanting to save the world by yourself! Letting go of such things is actually life-giving! This is a holy sacrifice, worthy of a disciple of Jesus!

The best sacrifices are those that we give for the sake of others, which is what Jesus taught us to do. We are familiar with most of them. For which parent among us would not sacrifice everything, even your life, for your children? We make sacrifices every day so that our children will have a better life, and the opportunities they need – even giving up some of our own interests to do so. When our neighbors are in trouble, or when tragedy or disaster strike people in our community or world, we often make sacrifices to help address their needs. And so

often when we make such sacrifices, when we give of what we have to others, you and I receive so much more. Our sacrifice then leads to life!

Through faith we also help others to carry the crosses that they bear. And when others help us to carry our cross, they lighten our load. For we consider the grief that comes from death or emotional loss as a cross to bear with faith.

Think of the cross carried by Patty and Jerry Wetterling all these years, after their son Jacob was abducted in October of 1989 (the year my son, David was born, and I was in my first pastoral call in Anoka). Not knowing whether he was alive or dead, with most giving him up for lost, with police investigations all at dead ends, they held on to their hope of one day finding him. The symbol of their hope was the porch light that they left burning every night in front of their home for 27 years. The cross they bore was the burden of realizing the reality that most likely their son was dead, but hanging on to that one glimmer of hope until they were sure, like that one single porch light in the darkness. And now, with the news yesterday that the accused suspect had led police to Jacob's remains, their cross, their burden becomes the grief that they bear in knowing that he had, indeed, died many years ago. Patty Wetterling said yesterday, *"All I can do is confirm that Jacob has been found, and my heart is broken... I have no words."* Later she said, *"Our family is drawing strength from all your love and support. We're struggling with words at this time. Thank you for your hope."*

But perhaps the cross of their hope all these years – their faith in the life Jacob continued to live in their hearts – has helped them endure the burden of their grief in their son being lost so suddenly and tragically. Like the grief of all mothers and fathers at the sudden death of their sons and daughters too soon from gun violence or domestic abuse, so senseless and tragic, which happens almost daily in communities throughout our nation today. We have heard so many mothers publicly grieve at the senseless loss of their children, in Minneapolis and St. Paul, in Chicago, or in Aleppo, Syria, and in a world where life often holds little value. It is all a cross that they bear, and often it is only faith and hope in God's goodness that can hold them together, when grief has no words...

But bearing the cross also means that with faith, even in our sufferings we are not alone. Jesus walks with us, leading the way. Our burdens are shared by others, and are not carried by only ourselves. So Jesus is not only asking us to give up our possessions as a sacrifice – it is an act which "clears the deck" so that we can better follow Jesus in service to others. When we help carry the cross, we walk with others who suffer from the loss of a child, from a life-threatening disease, from poverty or domestic violence or abuse. Carrying the cross means that people of faith address the injustices, the pain, and the suffering of so many in this world, to lighten each others' loads and to be the voices and hands of God's love.

So we follow Jesus, knowing that in our sinful and fallen world, this means carrying the cross. But we have hope, knowing that carrying the cross is the way in which Jesus redeems the world. May God give us the strength to follow him.

Intercessions of the Church:

We pray for the family of Jacob Wetterling, whose remains were found yesterday. For 27 years after Jacob was abducted, his family held on to hope that he would be found alive. Now we pray for comfort for Patty and Jerry Wetterling in their grief. Help them, and all parents who have lost children, to find hope in the resurrection, and in the compassion of our Lord for all God's children.