

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Second Sunday of Lent - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16

Psalm 22:23-31

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

2/25/2018

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

31[Jesus] 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.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Suffering

Good morning! Every day that we're in the office we have a little devotion. Sometimes it's just Sue and myself, other times Joe and Terry are there, or, Dale and Dianne. A few others have been present too. It's not a closed group, just anyone who is around who wants to be a part. The format is about as simple as it gets; we read the selected devotion for the day, talk about whatever we thought about during the devotion, and then whoever read that day closes with the provided prayer. We started with a selection of readings from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and after a year we switched to a book that uses different selections from the writings of Martin Luther. Some days they're great, but lately, they've been pretty tough. The season of Lent is like the Christian life in overdrive. Everything is magnified through these next forty days leading up to Easter. And much of that focus is directed towards suffering. It's been tough to find the good news in the words of Martin Luther these past few days.

So a week and half after a school shooting, in the beginning of a season that is characterized by its call to suffering, we hear the words in today's Gospel lesson about taking up the cross with new meaning. It's a hard lesson for us to hear. It's not one full of hope and happiness is it?

Now, whenever I preach and study a text I tend to do it through three different lenses. The first is what the original story was about before pen was put to paper. The second is what the text meant for the original audience, some 30-40 years later. The last is what it means for St. Paul's, here and now. When we hear today's story we run the risk of hearing the words "take up your cross" and assuming they're some sort of metaphor. This couldn't be further from the truth. For the original audience the context is clear, Jesus is talking about the very physical reality of being hung on a cross to die. When talking about crucifixion "*Cicero decried it: 'There is no fitting word that can possibly describe a deed so horrible' (Against Verres)."*¹

So that's what Jesus Christ calls us to do. And this whole exchange takes place RIGHT before he takes three disciples up on the mountain to witness the transfiguration. The context of witnessing that holy and strange event is set against the backdrop of having just been told that they need to deny themselves to have true life.

The phrase that helps me understand this text comes to us in verse 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.*" Jesus isn't calling us to throw our lives away needlessly. C. Clifton Black, Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, writes that: "*For the sake of the gospel' is a crucial qualification. One may give one's life for no good purpose. To give one's life for the sake of the good news instantiated by Jesus is the valid reason for self-sacrifice. In the economy governed by the gospel, the only way to be made whole is to let go of everything society reckons most valuable. There is no benefit in gaining the entire world -- values and aspirations as people define them -- if in so doing one forfeits one's deepest soul. Ultimately*

¹https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3568

*nothing in this world is worth exchanging for one's very center, the self that is claimed by the gospel and accountable to God (Mark 8:36-37)"*²

To use some Lutheran theology, it's the difference between Luther's theology of the cross vs. a theology of glory. Places of worship that paint a pretty and happy picture of faith are lying. They, and the world, might tell you that good things will happen if you just pray hard enough, that God will reward you with wealth and many other blessings. So, hearing what they offer, listen once again to the Gospel.

"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?"

Sounds a little different if you ask me... Once again, C. Clifton Black's words say it better than I could. *"Christian faith is not a life-style choice; it is a vocation to never-ending struggle. By lying about Jesus and the truth of the gospel, we deny the truth about ourselves. Rejecting the Son of Man, desperately trying to save our own lives, we lose ourselves -- just as he assured us we would (8:35-37). Only by giving ourselves to others as Jesus gave himself for us (10:45) will we ever find ourselves."*³

It's that "giving ourselves to others" part I've always had trouble with. My brain doesn't like uncertainty, so I immediately wonder *how much* I need to give. Does Jesus have a formula or equation for determining when I can stop or whether I've given enough? I doubt that I'm alone

²https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3568

³https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3568

in this either, we are always trying to see things in black and white, rather than the complicated grey where life seems to occupy so much space. It's at those times that we respond like Peter, telling Jesus to shut up. The Greek is much stronger, he uses the same words that Jesus uses when commanding unclean spirits. Jesus turns the tables around, saying "no, YOU shut up, Peter!"

But the whole point of the lesson today is to knock us out of that legalistic frame of mind. If we spend our time wondering and worrying about whether we've done enough to "give ourselves to others" then we've missed the point. Christ is calling us to a life that responds out of need, not for selfish reasons on our part, but out of love for our neighbor. It isn't about fulfilling a checklist, it's about seeing another human being in need and helping them, with no thought for oneself.

It's people like Coach Aaron Feis who put himself between bullets and his students that show us how to respond. It's people like Aitzaz Hasan, a 15 year old boy in Pakistan who died in 2014 when he tackled a suicide bomber who was entering his school of 2,000 students. The world is full of people willing to bear their cross. And that key phrase, "For the sake of the good news" is what makes all the difference. Because without it those deaths would be just that, an end. But hear the good news of Jesus Christ: Even when we were dead in sin God sent God's son to save us from the power of death. And after being tortured and killed and dying on a cross he rose three days later. Death does not have the last word... only Jesus Christ has that power. Thank God. Amen.