

Proper 17 A
August 28, 2011
Family of Christ Lutheran Church, Chanhassen, Minnesota
Pastor Kristie Hennig

Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Today's gospel reading contains one of Jesus' hardest sayings.
"If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me."

He says this after he has given his friends a glimpse
of the persecution and execution in his own future.
"You say you want to be my disciples?" he tells them.
"Then give up the good life you had planned for yourselves,
and follow me instead.
Oh, and by the way...I'm headed for a gruesome death."

It is really hard for us know what to make of this command of Jesus.
Self-denial just isn't part of our culture's image of the "good life."
In fact, we're infatuated with self-esteem;
we're all about self-improvement and personal style.
But the life of Christian discipleship moves in the opposite direction.

A professor of mine from Luther Seminary
conducted an informal survey of church mission statements.
He looked at websites and worship folders
to see what churches were saying about themselves,
the face they were presenting to the world.
Generally, congregations say they are warm and welcoming
communities.
They state that they are committed to serving Jesus by responding to the
needs of people near and far.
They say they seek to provide excellent educational programs,
fellowship opportunities, and meaningful worship.

They make statements about holding inspiring, biblical preaching as a core value.

But not one church the professor surveyed said anything about the call to suffer in Jesus' name.

What is missing from many mission statements (ours, too, I dare say) is the *cross*.

But it's hard to look at the cross, isn't it?

Especially on a beautiful summer day in Minnesota, far from hurricanes and earthquakes.

Anything but the cross and suffering on a day like this.

“Deny yourself and follow me.”

Is Jesus really saying that the only way to follow him is to give up anything pleasurable, neglect all self-care, and take every available path to our own destruction? Do we really have to die for love of him? Isn't there some way to love Jesus...and live?¹

Jesus doesn't call us to the bland life of a monk.

Jesus doesn't want us to hate ourselves.

He isn't angling for vows of poverty from most of us.

But he is calling us to look past the ethic of the individual.

And that's not easy for us.

Our culture has a tough time understanding an orientation to life that is *not* focused on the self.

The life Jesus wants to give us is different.

It's a life that is *not* centered on the individual.

Jesus' call to discipleship is about community.²

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Risking Life”, *The Seeds of Heaven*, 52-53.

² M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. VIII, 352.

My daughter Kate and I went to a solemn funeral last week;
I haven't been able to get some of the images out of my mind since.
A friend of hers from high school, John, was one of the Navy SEALs
who died in the Afghani desert
when the helicopter transporting him and 29 others was shot down –
probably in retaliation for the killing of Osama bin Laden.
Beneath the picture of her grinning friend –
dressed in combat gear, holding an automatic weapon –
were words from Jesus:
“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's
friends.”

Everyone who spoke in that service –
the priest, the Navy buddies eulogizing John,
his parents whose statement was read by a family friend,
even John himself quoted in his own writings –
all spoke of his strong faith,
his love for friends and family,
and his willingness to suffer and die for the good of others.

I don't begin to understand the forces at work within this young man that
resulted in his choosing to relinquish his life the way he did.
Is this what Jesus had in mind when he told the Twelve
and the rest of us,
“Deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow me”?

I honestly don't know.

But I do know this:
as we follow Jesus into the places Jesus likes to hang out in,
we too will experience suffering.
Today as we baptize/baptized little Alexis,
we don't/didn't breathe a word of it.

But years from now,
when she stands in front of this altar to confirm her faith,
her pastors will lay their hands on her head and pray God to grant her
“patience in suffering.”
Because she’ll need that.
We all do.

I don’t think Jesus means for us to seek out suffering,
looking for crosses to pick up as we make our way through life.
The storms of life blow through sure enough,
leaving plenty of debris behind them.
That we will suffer in this life is a given.
Living in fear of suffering, of death is not much of a life.
It’s as good as being dead, really.

Now living the life of faith –
is not about being a daredevil, either.
This is not about signing up for skydiving lessons
or enlisting in the military
or going bungee jumping at the State Fair, just for the thrill of it.

But it *is* about working through the fears we naturally have,
and taking some risks anyway.
It’s about taking some risks for the sake of God’s kingdom;
It’s about living before we die.
It’s about following Jesus, putting others first, giving ourselves away.

“The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words to us in [Matthew,
writes preacher Barbara Brown Taylor]
is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of life,
because fear of death always turns into fear of life,
into a stingy, cautious way of living that is not living at all.
The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words
is that the way to have abundant life [a life that matters] is not to save it
but to spend it,

to give it away, because life cannot be shut up and saved...
any more than fresh spring water can be put in a mason jar and kept in a
kitchen cupboard.

Oh, it will remain water,
and if you ever open it you can probably drink it,
but it will have lost its essence, its life, which is to be poured out,
to be moving, living water,
rushing downstream to share its wealth without ever looking back.”³

“From that time on,” the gospel reports, “Jesus began to show his
disciples that...he must undergo suffering...and be killed...”
And Peter said, Wait a minute, Jesus! This must *never* happen to you!

Peter didn't want Jesus' life to be spilled, to be wasted.
He wanted to save Jesus, to put him in a jar and keep him on a shelf.
But he forgot that Jesus' life is endless.
The more he gives the more he has to give –
a gushing waterfall of living water sent to drench a dry, dry world.

Peter was so caught up in his fear of losing Jesus
that he doesn't hear Jesus say that on the third day
Jesus will be raised from death.
We nearly miss that promise, too.

Jesus calls us to live lives that matter,
to water the world with the living water that makes all things new.
And he backs this up with the limitless supply that is his life.

In his pep talk to the Christians in Rome,
Paul has some ideas about building such a life:
Cling to what is good, he says.
Love one another with zeal,
rejoice in hope,
keep your front doors wide open,

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Risking Life”, *The Seeds of Heaven*, 55-56.

embrace your enemies and work for their success,
overcome evil with good.

Here are some more:

- Do the right thing at work.
- Go out of your way to be a friend to someone who needs one.
- Stand up to a bully.
- In other words, get out of your jar and off your shelf.
- Spill yourself out, spend yourself on the world God loves.

I invite you to finish this sermon with the prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, found on p. 87 of the hymnal.

Please pray with me...

Lord, make us an instrument of Your peace
Where there is hatred, let us sow love
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light and where there is sadness, joy.
O Lord, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled but to
console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love
For it is in giving that we receive
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

- St. Francis of Assisi