

Second Sunday in Lent (b)
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Romans 4:13-25 Mark 8:31-38
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
February 28, 2021

Today's gospel lesson always comes to us at this time of year. Right now there's a ton of snow on the ground, but still, in late February I'm always starting to look forward to Spring. The days are getting noticeably longer. Everything's going to start waking up in just a few weeks. I'm already starting to feel that drive to get up, get out, be more active. I love that feeling.

But in the middle of it, the people who put together the lectionary—the three year cycle of bible readings we follow in worship—those party-poopers throw this gospel lesson at us: Jesus telling us that we have to take up our cross and follow him. Telling us basically that we have to die in order to live. Every year I struggle with this one. Frankly, I don't naturally tend to want to talk about a cross. It's not where my mind wants to go. It's like in Chicago at my first church, to get to a particular hospital, I'd always drive past Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows Catholic Church. So I'd be all happy on a beautiful sunny day, and then I'd come to the church sign, and be reminded that the world is filled with perpetual sorrow. And I don't want to think about it; I'm just looking forward to being able to go outside, to go for walks, to be able to bike again. I'm looking forward to starting up the grill without putting on 3 layers of clothes.

But in church we're just getting started with this season called Lent. The Bible readings are especially challenging during this season. They call us to struggle against evil, selfishness and sin, to resist temptation. They talk about sacrifice. And today we hear some of most challenging words Jesus ever spoke.

He's telling us to come and die with him. It's obviously a total, all-encompassing experience, a total transformation he's calling us to. Obviously he's getting down deeper than the little things, the small sins and trespasses we commit from day to day, that we can do something about. When he calls us to come and die with him, he's telling us that the problem is—us. We are so completely bound up in the power of sin, it is so much more serious and deep than we like to think, that we literally have to be remade. I have to get a new ME, if I am going to have life, and communion, and a future with God.

So what am I going to do with that? Give up candy bars? Should I stop watching Netflix before I go to bed? Should I read more? Am I going to try to be more patient when I call the Spectrum customer service department, or have a more positive attitude when I'm at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles? Well, those are very good things that I absolutely should do; but obviously it's not enough to satisfy Jesus' demand in this gospel. So maybe I should sell all my possessions, quit my job, give up my family life and go to a monastery. I think sometimes Karen would be OK with that. But you know really, sometimes complete divestment, complete separation from everything in this world seems like a pretty good fantasy option. We feel like cutting and running. To use today's language, sometimes joining the cancel culture sounds attractive.

When I was a sophomore at college I went through several months of utter misery. I just hated my life. One night I got down on my knees in my dorm room to pray, and I asked God what should I do? Should I get out of here? Should I pack up and leave, transfer, quit school and get a job? And as I prayed, the answer came to me clear as day—I know it was from God. His answer was: Seth, wherever you go right now, you're going to be miserable, because *you're* still going to be there. That was a wonderful turning point for me. And that really is what Jesus' words in today's gospel do to us: Wherever you go, whatever you do, you're still going to be you, and that's the problem. What do we need to do? Jesus says follow him to Jerusalem. What *is* going to be enough to change our situation, bound in the power of sin...short of dying? That is the point. Jesus leaves us no room. We have nowhere to stand with the one who gives us life, except faith in Jesus Christ, and what he did for us on that cross.

Every year, when I'm confronted with today's gospel, I immediately think of all the things I should be doing to be a better Christian. The list is always long, so guilt comes into play. And that's appropriate. Guilt is a signal from God. It's not meant to paralyze us. It means it's time to change what we can in our lives. But it's not as if we can save ourselves. Jesus has already done that. For believers, guilt actually takes on a positive function in our lives. Whereas before, guilt paralyzed us, now living in Christ guilt becomes a gift that shows us what we can do to prepare the way for a closer, deeper, everyday relationship with our Savior who loves us. From the time we're baptized to our final day, Jesus will keep on exposing us for what we are, when we listen to him. But in faith we can die that baptismal death every day. It's a blessed death. Because to die in Jesus every day is also to rise with Jesus every day.

I've noticed, my first response to hearing Jesus' command, to take up my cross and follow him, is usually centered in myself. In what I can do. And that's part of our bondage to sin, too. If my life is my own, if

it's all centered in me, I am truly trapped. Bound to all the things **I do** that are harmful to me and my neighbors. Bound to my own weaknesses. Bound to all the things I should be doing, but am not. But then the Holy Spirit brings me around to the truth—that's what Jesus died for. To break through that power that keeps me bound to myself, and give me something new to hold onto: his word, his promise, his life. That's what this passage is about. It's really about a change of masters. From trying to be King of my own life, to being lifted up by the One who loves me and sets me free.

At first, when I hear Jesus say "take up your cross," I'm tempted to see just a cross that I have to bear in order to please God. But actually, Jesus is painting a much more positive picture of me *picking up and carrying* something that before I was stuck in the mud with. With Jesus, I'm not stuck in my sins any more. They're still there. But now I can *see* them in the light of his grace, and I can exercise what power I have to pick them up. I can address them. I can bring them to Jesus' cross, where they are put to death. Instead of sitting all bound up in myself and my sins, I can admit my failures and move on with my Savior. And in the end, when I can't pick up anything anymore, even my death is going to be put to death.

So here we are. It's wonderful how God shows his goodness this time of year, when we can sense that new life under the ice. God shows himself as a healer and a creator and an unceasing giver in all the good things we have and see. But the best thing God has ever done, better than all the Springs and celebrations we'll ever enjoy, is when the Son substituted his own life for ours on the cross.

Each of us can see a cross of some kind in front of us today, that we are challenged to carry. Maybe we're hesitating to take it up. Maybe we're trying to run away from it. But with the eyes of faith, we see who really dies there...on our cross...and it's not us. How about, let's lift up *his* cross and show it to the world? Shout it out from the rooftops—what he's done!

Christian freedom—the kind Jesus shows us with his life—is never going to be about running away from anything. It's about getting those things that are killing us out on the table and dealing with them. The big problems—the addictions, the broken relationships, the things that are weighing us down, making us hopeless and despairing. And the smaller things too—the nasty comments we find ourselves making, the gossip, the envy. Give that all to Jesus. In your baptism into Jesus Christ, God looks at you and sees the perfection of Jesus. You are going to be his child forever. In his eyes, you are everything you need to be.

So what will you and I do with this amazing grace, now? That's really the question of this season: With all the countless ways we can thank and glorify and adore our amazing God, what can we do today?