

Pentecost 15, 2009
Good Hope Lutheran Church
Mark 8: 34

From the Gospel of Mark, chapter 8, this is verse 34.
Jesus called the crowd together and said, If anybody wants to become my disciple. Let him deny himself, pick up his cross, and follow me.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, grant to us the severe mercy of the cross. For each one here today, point out to us your chosen path, and even when that path seems contrary to everything we think we want or need—if it is what *you* want, give us the faith and strength to follow, knowing that at last you will lead us to a kingdom that has no end. Lord Jesus grant us a cross, that at length we may behold the empty tomb. In your name we pray, AMEN.

For a variety of reasons, which some of you perhaps can guess, I've found myself lately thinking back to my days as a seminary student. Seminary of course is a unique kind of graduate school, where one studies to prepare for a career in ministry; and I was in one, in Chicago; a student there in the mid 1980's. Ancient history, I realize.

Anyway, for those seeking to enter the ministry, the words of Jesus today in Mark chapter 8 have a special kind of force. "If you want to be my disciple," Jesus said. "If this is really what you're looking for in life, this Christianity thing. Then let's be clear. You have to deny yourself, pick up your cross, follow me, there is no other way. There is no short cut, there's no phoning it in. No lame excuses that you pretend somehow are reasons. No, if this is what you want, this Christianity thing. Then deny yourself, pick up

your cross, follow me.” Now I do believe this verse applies to all Christians equally—you want to be a disciple? You want *eternal life* in heaven? Well then here’s what it’s about on earth, no excuses—the words of Jesus apply to all of us, understand that. But obviously those studying in seminary have heard these words of Jesus in a special sort of way—otherwise, what are we doing in seminary, if you, see what I mean.

Well, to the point. My friends and I back then talked about the meaning of this verse in our personal lives, many times in fact. And we imagined what crosses were out there waiting for us, what hardships we young pastors would have to bear for Jesus in this world. That midnight phone call from the hospital, we must rush to the side of a dying member. That agonizing counseling session, where a couple struggles to reconcile and rebuild. We wondered a lot about crosses in those days—and somehow, the ones we imagined always had a made-for-television look about them, high drama. High drama, we were. Naïve. As graduation from seminary draws near, the church begins assigning students to different parts of the country—not to specific congregations yet, just parts of the country; and the church tries to be nice about this. You’re from western PA? Well, maybe you wouldn’t mind the Cleveland area; and so forth. But sooner or later. Sooner or later someone has to be assigned to North Dakota. No way around it, someone

has to go to North Dakota, faithful folks out there, they need pastors too.

Only nobody wanted to. Nobody wanted to go there, those who were asked, declined. All that talk about carrying a cross for Jesus, enduring hardships for the Lord, well here's one for you young pastors, Why not Minot, try North Dakota on for size. No. No thank you.

By the way I was not asked to go to North Dakota. For good or ill I've always gone where they sent me, even if I privately did have a few questions—why I even went to northwest Ohio when they asked me to. We smile but, my 80 year old mom lives alone in Kansas. I have questions.

But the cross. And, crosses in our lives personally. I've learned a few things anyway. Crosses are seldom dramatic, and they don't make for very interesting TV. They're very common, crosses are actually everyday occurrences, so common in fact; we hardly notice how glib we are about, ignoring them? Yeah? And one, helpful way of identifying the crosses in your life. One rule of thumb. They are almost always the exact opposite, of what it is you want personally. Tell me what it is you personally think sounds fun and easy in your life right now; and I have a very good chance of telling you what the crosses are in your life right now, cause they'd be the opposite. Sorry, they'd be the opposite.

Fun and easy to gossip. Awkward and inconvenient not just to walk away

from the chatter, but to put an end to it. Fun and easy to spend time and money on self, awkward and inconvenient to notice your neighbor in need and to actually take the time and make the effort and spend the money, to help. Fun and easy to fill your mind with the latest garbage entertainment, awkward and inconvenient to be the one who comes to church, or who sits down alone with an open Bible. Fun and easy to gripe. Oh baby, fun and easy to gripe. Fun and easy to lament the state of the world and how sad things are anymore, awkward and inconvenient to look in the mirror and to reflect on the example you're setting for your own children, or how you are helping your own community. Fun and easy to think about problems in the world you have absolutely no opportunity to solve. Awkward and inconvenient to work on the problems, right under your own nose, and within your own household, and here's the thing about crosses. They are awkward, and inconvenient. They are expensive in terms of your days, and your dollars, and your dreams. They can be expensive in terms of your friendships, and they offer no instant gratification to anybody, and there's usually very little sense that anything has changed or anyone has noticed or anybody even cares, crosses are kind of lonely that way, and they're right there! In front of you everyday!

And when you pick up the cross at last, all you get with it is Jesus. That's

it, that's all, crosses come with the promise of "Jesus and His love," and that's pretty much it. And if having *only Jesus* doesn't sound like much fun on earth—what about heaven sounds good to you? Why do you want to go to heaven so bad, don't you know that's what heaven is?—the presence of Jesus, the presence of Jesus, not a vacation condo in the sky, just Jesus! If we can't be happy with just Jesus on earth, I wonder sometimes why we're looking forward to heaven so much, cause that's basically what heaven is—Jesus, just Jesus, and the fellowship of all others who have given up everything else, to just have Jesus too.

Well anyway, pick up your cross Jesus said, and follow me. It's not sadism, but it's not for sissies either. As I first learned in seminary the cross is not a day dream, it is a daily reality. It is not an abstraction, it is a series of concrete choices each day, with actual consequences. And the cross is not simply the path to heaven. It is not simply the path to heaven, the cross is instead what heaven looks like on earth—the cross is that moment by His grace you can let go of everything else, and hold on to Jesus, just Jesus; and it's enough. It's more than enough. It's the Kingdom of God.

May we by His grace find ourselves in that Kingdom—today, and everyday, for all eternity. And may we find it to be more than enough. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN.