

Take Up Your Cross

A sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday of Pentecost

Matthew 16:21-28

There are two verses in today's Gospel text that we will focus on:

"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'"

That pair of verses, one way or another, is found in the Gospels sixteen times. In other words, this is not one isolated item in a list but is given again and again and again. Nor does it say: "Your intentions are what counts." Nor does it say: "Try the best you can." It doesn't allow for us to say: "I'm not perfect, but I'm doing better than so-and-so over there."

Nor is this theme as a theme alone in Scripture. For example, in the Book of James 1:27 it says: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." Also 2 Cor 6:14-15: "Be not mismatched with unbelievers. . . . For what has Christ to do with the powers of evil? And what have believers to do with unbelievers?" or in Matt 7:13-14 there is the famous parabolic saying that one way is wide and one way is narrow. Matt 7:14 says the narrow way is hard. Then in John 13:34-35 in the Upper Room, it says: "Love one another as I have loved you, by this all men will know that you are my disciples that you love one another."

To put it more directly, it says: "Love your enemies." It says in 1 John 3:15: "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer." In Matt 5 it not only says love your enemies but also whoever looks with lust has already committed adultery (Matt 5:28). If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out (Matt. 5:29).

Throughout Christian history there have been those who said: "We have to take this seriously." Already in the Second Century not only do we have the martyrs but martyrs who said: "He said if you deny me before men, I will deny you before heaven, so I'm going to speak out even if it costs me my life."

There were also those in the Second Century who said: "I'm going to live this life," and they withdrew to live apart from the world and monastic communities developed, built on the ideas of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and they are

found in the Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican communions. It fosters a two-level Christianity. There are those who really live it, and there are the rest of us who live in a broken way and we are forgiven, but we're lesser.

What about Protestants? We have, in effect, the same thing among us. We say: "Well, that was a Christian thing to do." Or: "She was a real saint." What we are doing when we say that is setting up certain levels of living. There are even some monastic-type Lutheran communities in Sweden and Germany and maybe even in some parts of the US. And Lutheran hymnbooks now include a list of saints who can be remembered. Hymns like "Oh, that the Lord Would Guide My Ways," particularly verse 4: "Nor let my head or heart or hands offend against my God," promote a saintly level of living.

Many of us grew up in a time when if you were really going to be a Christian, you needed to be a missionary or a minister. In this way, too, we Protestants have fostered levels of living that are considered holier and more Christian.

There are several things that should bring us up short. In all religions there are the holy ones. This is even true in Judaism. We can see in the Old Testament they have their holy ones and saints. In Islam in the Sufi tradition and in other parts of it there are the saints. In Buddhism there are the sages and bodhisattvas who are known for their compassion and holiness. In Hinduism there are Ashrams, which are like monasteries. We have records of people who were ascetic and separated themselves from the world.

It is also true that Christianity can become established and dominant as it has in the West. When the Edict of Toleration was promulgated in 313 A. D., Christianity was no longer persecuted. It became the established religion and ever since then the Constantinian settlement has meant that Christianity and the culture sort of folded into each other.

It is important to realize that both of these situations (Christianity withdrawing from the world or being folded into the dominant culture) are wrong. It is neither that Christianity is counter-cultural nor conforming to the culture. Both ways are caught in spiritual pride. The Evil One tricks us into thinking that salvation is by works, by counter-cultural works or by cultural works. In both cases we end up in spiritual pride. Both are guilty of thinking: This is the way the Christian life has to look and to be.

This is spelled out neatly by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor 4:3-5: "I am not even to judge myself. God alone judges." We think we're not supposed to judge others, but the big thing is that we're not supposed to judge ourselves. We are not the ones who can establish our situation; God alone judges.

There is quite a bit said in Scripture about this. In Luke 18:19 Jesus says: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Jeremiah 17:9 states: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt." Romans 3:10: "No one is righteous, no, not one. . . no one does good, not even one," and Paul goes on like that for ten more verses.

Since we are to be neither counter-cultural nor absorbed into the culture, it's important to get back to the Gospel. This is the theme of the Book of Romans. Romans 1:16-17 states: "The Gospel is the power of God for salvation." And what is that? In the next verse which was Luther's famous rediscovery of Paul, it says: "The righteousness of God which he gives us." It is not a righteousness which the Lord demands of us and which he is expecting us to match up to in some way or another. As Luther says, when he read this verse, it was as if a light went on: The righteousness God gives us. He gives his righteousness to us in his Word and sacraments. It is not because of anything in us but in spite of us. In Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the hearing of the Word, he comes to us and gives us that certainty. Because we have that certainty, we are free.

Here is an example of what that freedom means for daily life. Consider the Seventh Commandment: "Thou shall not steal." That is in Exodus 20:5 and Deuteronomy 5:19. Why is it there? A law against stealing was not unique to the Old Testament. It's found in many law codes in other places at the time and since then. Because it is asking the question that Paul writes about in Romans 13:10: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." In other words: What works to sustain life in this world? What behaviors cause harm? If everyone can steal and have everybody else's things, if everybody owns everything, I can't have my own toothbrush. Suddenly we get nervous. The basic affirmation of the need for private property is built into the ancient code of Hammurabi as well as the ancient Mosaic code we find in the Bible.

That is an example of what we are to do today. We ask: What laws make life work so society does not collapse into chaos and barbarism? What boundaries do we

need to protect the civil order? We work this out by reasoning together, by asking: What does harm? Knowing we live by forgiveness and that basically because we are totally his and made his by Jesus Christ, our salvation is taken care of. It is not by our good works. We are called to take care of life now, knowing he takes care of life forever. Amen