

King of Glory Lutheran Church

February 24-25, 2018

Year B: Lent 2: Mark 8:31-38

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Walking our Crosses with God

Taking up a cross is about relationship and walking with God. The heavier the cross, the more God will provide.

What do you think? When Martin Luther posted his 95 complaints about the Catholic church he wanted to have a faithful conversation, even a dialog, even a scholarly debate about his thoughts. He had no idea that his ideas, his complaints would spark a revolution that would change the church and impact so many sectors of his world.

As the Church began to rise up against Luther, do you think his spirit changed? Do you believe that he grew as the debate grew? Was Luther's spirit and mind in the same place as when he sat down to pen those first thoughts?

I think it was. There wasn't much challenge – in fact it was the normal order of the day – to call for a debate in 1517. But several years later when a room is filled with the heads of the church and a spokesperson for Emperor Charles the V, and Luther is challenging the absolute authority of the Pope...well the stakes are much higher.

In the beginning, Luther might not have even thought about it as a cross to take up. But when your very life is at stake and the question comes, "Will you recant – take back everything you've said?" Well that's a pretty heavy cross, isn't it?

The same is true of Mother Teresa. Her father died when she was eight years old. That changed her. When she prayed at the Shrine of the Black Madonna, her faith was strengthened with resolve to a religious life. But when she left home at age 18, she had no idea where God might take her or how God might use her. She was following Jesus as a disciple, denying herself and finding the Lord's cross to carry.

And the same is true of Lucy van Pelt in the Snoopy Cartoons. Her crosses to bear are Charlie Brown's depression and his stupidity, Linus' security blanket that she's always yanking away from him and yes, her unrequited love of the piano playing Schroeder.

Yes – crosses vary in difficulty – unrequited love is not really parallel to the Roman Empire.

Here's what we notice. In the first part of the story, Peter is upset with Jesus! Right before this text starts, Jesus had just finished saying, "Shh. Don't tell anyone I am the Messiah." Then in the very next sentence, that's exactly what Jesus does! "The Son of Man will undergo suffering. I'm headed to Jerusalem to die."

Peter begins to upbraid his Lord. Like talking to a small child or someone you take care of, that's Peter's tone. We can fill in what Peter might have said. "Jesus, you are not supposed to tell people that. It's not true. You know it. I know it."

Bless his heart, I don't think there's any way Peter could understand! I don't think Peter can humanly understand at this point what Jesus is telling people. Perhaps he doesn't want Jesus to suffer, or he is trying to posture himself above his rabbi, or any number of reasons. But Peter doesn't get the cross. The big cross. The one Jesus will die on. Right now, he's simply doing his best to get through each miracle without losing his head. He's walking with God. He's in a relationship.

Jesus too is in a relationship. He berates Peter for berating him. "Get behind me! That's the proper place for a disciple. In this relationship, you don't try to take care of me, you don't coddle me, you don't tell me what is or isn't going to happen! That, Peter is what this relationship is about."

A proficient teacher will often talk to the whole class about her expectations, hoping that just one student will hear. "We all get in line, quietly by the door." In other words, "Suzy, get over here!"

So Jesus calls the crowd and his disciples and tells them what this life of discipleship will look like. "You're going to lose your life. In losing it, you'll save it. You'll find a life better than you can imagine. Carry my cross."

This week in Bible study we were talking about what crosses look like. Pat Johnson gave me permission to share her remarks. I was telling her that by giving up an hour every Wednesday morning, hungry kids had something to eat. That was carrying a cross. Because if she didn't do that, hunger would be even more rampant than ever in Loveland.

She said to me, "That's not a cross! I have so much fun doing that! That's easy. I see my friends, and the best part is the donuts at Donut Haus afterwards!"

So then we thought about the nature of the type of Jesus crosses for us.

Some crosses are easy and fun! The joy we find in serving others is a gift from the Holy Spirit. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35) And that is what it feels like to save our lives. When we give them away – not in self-pity or in self-hatred – then God's abundant blessings return to us.

Susan Chamberlin also told me I could share her comments. Susan and Tom have headed up the garden for the last several years. They come every day to that garden. When beds need weeding they weed. When the watering system is broken, they fix it. This last summer it was the rabbits. Those "rascally rabbits!" I think they chewed through the fence at least three times. Every time Tom would build a new fence. I said that they were giving up their lives for service

to others in the garden. And when Susan told him about our Bible study conversation, he said this, "I am not giving up anything. That is my life. Isn't that why we are here – to do what we can for others?"

Yes. That's it. Others. The people in our community. In our families. In our workplaces. We carry crosses because of relationship.

Take a look at the first reading, Genesis 17, the very first verse. "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty, walk before me, and be blameless. I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous."

Retired professor Terrance Freitheim says the word, 'blameless' carries a sense of 'faithfulness, whole, integrated.' It's not necessarily 'perfect or sinless' like we would naturally think of 'blameless.'

The Lord is inviting Abram to walk with God. Be in a relationship – so that the fruitfulness of the covenant will be revealed. God is calling Abram to relationship. So was Jesus. Jesus was calling Peter to relationship.

And aren't relationships where we find the crosses of our lives?

Yes – some crosses are joy filled! Donuts at Donut Haus – oh – packing food bags for Kids Pak and working in the Glory Garden. (See now when you're eating a donut, you can tell your spouse, you're carrying Jesus' cross.)

And some crosses are more difficult. Journeying with an aging parent, or a child that doesn't have a job, or a sick friend. What do we do? We ask ourselves questions. "Should I be over there every day? Am I supposed to take hot dish every night or only once a week? Do I take them to every appointment or could they find another ride?" Taking up a cross isn't always clear cut. It can be lonely. Confusing. Tiring. Losing life with Jesus means there is sacrifice.

Yet – because there is a relationship there – we do it. And often as the relationship demands more of us, we continually figure out how lift that darn cross. When do we need to stop and set it down for a time out? What do we need to refill our own energy so that we can continue helping someone else?

Luther likely didn't ask these same questions. But in the sense that his own soul grew the longer and more complex the situation became, he did ask these questions.

"Lord – what does this cross look like? I cannot recant my faith in you! I will not desert the faith you have instilled in me!" Taking up crosses because of relationships requires of us to dig deeper, pray with eyes wide open, and search for answers.

But what else did Jesus' say? "Those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel – in order to be in relationship with me – will save their lives."

We're not in this alone! God is the other travel partner. God gives us strength and patience and courage and joy. Jesus provides the satisfaction even when the cross is heavy and the road is long. God gives us grace to grow into the weight of our crosses and pulls us towards the joy of our passions for the sake of the world!

Living Lutheran story about grace. A Caucasian family didn't want to have a Black female pastor bury their husband and father. Crosses to bear. www.livinglutheran.org/2018/02/grace-2/

We know what crosses Jesus is asking us to carry right now. We know their shape, their weight, where the wooden stickers hurt us the most. And we know – because of the relationship we have with God – that we don't carry the cross alone. God will give us, just like the female African American pastor, the grace we need to see it through. Not always easy, but it's a journey and God' provides.

We don't have to be Martin Luther or Mother Teresa. We just get to walk, faithfully with God. Amen.