

Aligning with God

King of Glory Lutheran Church

September 2-3, 2023

Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry

Year A: Pentecost 14: Matthew 16:21-28

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Jesus' salvation; which comes through the cross, isn't only for individuals. It is for the sake of the whole world. Therefore, what will we as a church community align ourselves with for the sake of others? What we don't do and how we don't act can be a stumbling block to God's purposes in the world.

A young couple was working through their budget. How much would they need to pay bills? How much could they afford to give away? How much did they want for play money? Over the course of several nights, they prayed for God to lead them in their decisions.

The money for rent, electricity, water and trash was pretty straightforward. Yet when it came to what amounts they desired to give away, it took more thought. Because not only did they need to decide an amount, it gave them joy to reflect on where their giving aligned with their values.

In the end, they chose two organizations that reflected values they held dear: hunger and antisemitism. The amount wasn't huge...but they loved the fact that

their small offerings would be advancing the work of ending hunger and antisemitism in God's world.

Take up your cross and follow me.

I don't know what you hear or what you feel when you hear this verse. If I can take a guess, there might be at least one time you've heard it, or thought about it like this.

'You're not suffering enough. So just get with the program and suffer for God, because we all know that Jesus suffered the most. He gave His ultimate for you! Yes, you!'

Then we're like, whoa, guilt trip! 'Don't I have enough suffering in my life, God? The kids are in trouble at school. My spouses' job could be on the line. My mother-in-law is always making under-her-breath comments about my cooking. I just chipped another fingernail – they cost me \$30 you know, and now you want me to pick up yet another cross? Don't you think suffering is overrated, God? I think it is.'

Ever felt that way? We live in this individualistic culture. It's the air we breathe. So we remember the verse as saying, 'Take up your cross.' Then we move quickly to connect taking up a cross with suffering, pain, and denial which is what Jesus says and implies which makes Him into a real kill-joy. That also is logical. We know there is blood on Golgatha.

And it's not what the text says. Listen...

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Jesus is talking to the *whole group of disciples*. It's 'ya'll take up a cross' not 'you take up a cross.' This is because Jesus has just told them where He is headed and it will take another twelve chapters for them to figure it out. His remarks to Peter are not so much in the vein of 'you're stupid'. Rather, 'Peter, you're thinking like a human being and you simply cannot see the whole picture that God and I have figured out.'

Jesus didn't hang on that cross for just me and mine. His salvation came for the whole world! Therefore, what we do and what we don't do as spouses, as churches, as community can either hinder or enlarge God's kingdom on earth. The crosses that we choose to take up, the organizations or causes we choose to align ourselves with...really do make a difference.

When this congregation voted to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation, we chose to align ourselves with God's command to love all people. Yes, we lost a few households. Likewise, there was great joy for many households that when their own relatives would visit here, it would be a safe space. That's a community who discerns where God is leading them to align actions with values. That's discipleship.

It's the same thing with our Glory Garden or welcoming Alcoholics Anonymous into our building. We're dismantling stumbling blocks of discrimination of hunger and addiction so that all people are welcome here and we are a church of healing.

Taking up God's cross is beautiful! It's life-giving! It brings joy; like it did for the young couple who gave to hunger and anti-semitism. Oh Holy Spirit keep cleaning house in our spirits. Open the windows of our hearts to know that taking up your cross is just fabulous!

On the flip-side. What we don't do and the ways we refuse to act can also put stumbling blocks in front of people looking for God. Consider this. If we were to stop collecting a Lenten offering for World Hunger, what would be the consequences? Women wouldn't receive micro-loans. Children wouldn't have school supplies. Communities wouldn't get fresh water. Shelves would be empty of life-saving medicines and vaccines. Our collective donations bring huge tangible results to God's children the world over! If we were to stop, others would surely suffer.

When congregations take on God led projects, it not only helps our own discipleship, but we teach our young people and instill in them the value of living a cross-shaped life. The night of my public interview here at King of Glory, a boy named Nick, only a third or fourth grader came up to me afterwards with multiple dollar bills. "I want to help feed people!" he said. His mom shared that Nick had been saving his allowance to give to the new pastor so he could help hungry kids. He did it! That's what you all instilled in him. He caught the vision of a cross-shaped life. He was delighted to hand over his hard-earned allowance.

Peter and the other disciples had much to learn about this kind of living. Yes there would be pain and suffering and denial. But there would also be new insights about sacrificial grace, love and a divine plan. It's a journey you know. A journey.

I'm curious, King of Glory. I'm curious what cause we will align ourselves with next? Where will God lead us to sacrificial grace? We've welcomed the marginalized, grown vegetables, and sheltered families. What joy awaits us in taking up our cross again?

Let us pray together.

Lord God, we never want to hinder your ministry on earth. Keep leading us to projects that support who you are and who you want us to be. Teach us your ways of discipleship and living cross-shaped lives. Amen!