

Sundays after Pentecost - Year C [Proper 18C]

September 9, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 1; Luke 14: 25-33

“A Cross-Shaped Life”

“Jesus is walking relentlessly, ominously toward Jerusalem,” toward more conflict with authorities that threatens his life. His popularity is growing. In today’s gospel, Jesus finds himself “surrounded by large, enthusiastic crowds.” They have heard about his teachings, his stunning parables and his healing of hurting people. One pastor put it this way, “What Jesus has in front of him is every church growth guru’s dream ---- a mass of hungry people ready to be fed by the gospel. All Jesus has to do is to woo them, to entertain them just a bit — to give them tempting glimpses of power and comfort, success and happiness — and then he can literally haul them in. Yes, with just a little marketing finesse Jesus could easily break the [new] membership statistics [of all times] — and receive all kinds of kudos. Instead, Jesus offends [and frightens] them — and us — with hard words. Instead of a feel good faith, Jesus offers demanding discipleship.”¹

His words sound so harsh, but I think Jesus is speaking with great compassion and potent honesty. Using deliberate exaggeration to make his point, Jesus asks, "Are you willing to put the LORD your God first above ALL else? Before your family, your possessions, your very life? Choose. This discipleship will cost you your life. Choose. A discipleship that does not affect or direct every part of your life is meaningless. Choose."

This is tough stuff. And believe me, at the onset of our of our Welcome Home, Haven month, about to welcome five new members into the congregation, I’m tempted to try to sugar coat it. But then I would be making a choice the gods of popularity and easy comfort over the LORD our God who has delivered us from slavery, gives us eternal love and loyalty at baptism and in Christ, gifts us with the inheritance of eternal life and life in which God will always be with us. Choose, Jesus says to me. In the light of God’s amazing, free and unearned graciousness, choose. You cannot be lukewarm. You are with me or you’re with someone else.” So I choose Jesus.

“This is a passage about priorities not [rejecting family] — about loyalty not law — about perseverance not popularity. It is a passage about counting the cost and knowing what you are getting into and finishing what you start — about the difference between being a camp follower of Jesus and a disciple of Jesus — the difference between fad and faithfulness. Jesus is trying to tell us, with absolute [almost brutal] clarity, that our relationship with God needs to come first in our lives. If anything else take precedence — family or work or possessions ---- well then we are quite simply living lives of idolatry.”² As William Willimon has said: “Christianity is a lifestyle, the following of someone headed in a direction we would not normally go.”³

Putting God first. It sounds right. Putting our love of God first. It sounds pious and holy and good...but what does it mean? At first glance, it may seem to describe the life of religious men or women who withdraw from the world to live in solitude and prayer in a monastery or convent. That *is* how some have chosen to put the love of God first but that cannot be the only way. Consider the first disciples. Some had businesses; some lived in communities that shared all their possessions. Some traveled to far off places to spread the word and others would oversee the care of the widows and orphans in their local neighborhood. They, too, were seeking to put God first.

“A Cross-Shaped Life” That phrase captured my attention as we prepared for Sunday worship. You will hear it in the first prayer petition. A Cross-Shaped Life. I encourage you to write it on your bulletin and take it home with you. There is some deep truth there that I’ve been trying to mine and mull this week.

In the Crossway Bible series, the symbol for life as God meant it is a figure with open and outreached arms. It is life opened to God and others. The kind of life Adam and Eve first knew in the garden, when there was nothing that separated them from God, who would come to walk with them in the Garden in the cool of the evening. Nothing that separated them from one another (called nakedness) — no need to hide, be ashamed or insecure — because they were both fully, completely loved, treasured and gifted by God.

The symbol for sin in that Crossways Bible Study series is a figure with its arms crossed in front of its chest or hands planted on the hip. It's the stance of one who is self-centered and absorbed. It is a person who is disconnected from God and others *unless* there is something in it for his or her own comfort or benefit. Now look at the difference. (*Show — Arms tightly folded across my chest. Arms open and extended.*) Open to God and others looks mighty close to extending one's self to be placed on a cross, don't you think? Look at the difference in attitude. Look at the difference in what is possible when you have your arms crossed and when they are open. Look at how much more you see, how much more able you are to respond to what is going on around you. This is a Cross-Shaped Life, modeled after Jesus way of being in the world.

Make no mistake, that openness in loving God and one another also makes us vulnerable. We are clear targets for those who want to call us Jesus-freaks, saps, bleeding hearts, faith-blind, unrealistic, impractical or goody-two shoes. Others will not understand that putting our love of God first, doesn't mean we leave our brains at the door. It doesn't mean we will not struggle with the complexities and disagree about how best to help our neighbor and the world in all its messiness. A Cross-Shaped Life will also make us vulnerable in another way. Reaching in love to God and neighbor will open our hearts to pain and the temptations of despair and hopelessness. As we see the devastation In the Bahamas, hear of children who don't have enough food here in Hagerstown or watch our family and friends make poor choices, our hearts will ache and we can feel overwhelmed. These are among the costs of following Jesus. The hurt of compassion and sacrificing our own comfort to help the hurting. This is following Jesus. This is putting God first. This is the Cross-Shaped Life to which we have been called in our baptism. Lives of love, caring, compassion, service and sacrifice that bring great meaning, joy and hope to us and the world.

Putting our love of God first does not mean ignoring our responsibilities to family, friends, school studies, employment and the community. Instead, it means deciding how to live out those responsibilities when the love, faithfulness and redeeming power of God

is the essential, the very center of who we are. This is tough stuff. But we need not let the fear of failure or falling short stop us from trying. *Discipleship is not about perfection - it's about faithfulness.* Discipleship is about making one decision after another to live a cross-shaped life faithfully - trying to be faithful to Jesus' way of being in this world in every circumstance. I found one poet's description of those first disciples encouraging:

It did not begin
 when they understood him;
It did not begin
 when they discovered who he was;
It did not begin
 when they found what he could do.

It began
 when they stayed with him.
 when they left where they had been
 and went to where he was.

That is how it all began.
And ever since then,
 our whole life,
 whether alone
 or together,
 has been that simple struggle
 against ourselves
 and our world
 to stay
 with
 Jesus⁴

In our Baptism, we were plunged into that struggle, too. Each day and decision we wrestle with how to stay with Jesus, how to put our love of God first. And perhaps it's when we fall on our knees to confess before Christ, "I cannot be your disciple. I can't seem to do it," that we're finally able to hear Jesus say, "Now you're ready to be my disciple. Follow me. Just stay with me. For where you can't, I can. It's my job to transform you. It's yours to stay with me. Choose. Please choose over and over again, day in and day out, each hour and minute. It's not easy but, oh, what we are able to do together!" Amen.

Linda M Alessandri

ENDNOTES

1. Initial quotes in the paragraph and longer passage from Susan R. Andrews, "What Family Values" Sept. 9, 2010 posted on www.goodpreacher.com

2. Ibid

3. William Willimon, *The Last Word*, pg. 60 as quoted by Susan R. Andrews, "What Family Values" Sept. 9, 2010 posted on www.goodpreacher.com

4. Samuel K. Davis; [Alive Now](#) magazine