



15th After Pentecost
“The Cost of Discipleship”
September 5, 2010

*Prayer: Bless this word proclaimed, and we who hear it,
O Lord, that we may take up our cross and follow you. Amen.*

Always, we begin again. For some, a new school year has started this past week. For others, a new school year begins this week. Next week, we begin an exciting year of Sunday School for both children and adults. There is a sense of newness and crispness in the air.

Beginning again is a good thing. Daily, we begin again. Each day is different than the previous one.

Discipleship is a matter of beginning again. Jesus tells us today what the requirements are – requirements that are far more complex than what we think they are. Jesus tells us, “take up your cross and follow me”.

Taking up our cross and following Jesus is neither a burden nor a form of punishment. Rather, taking up one’s cross is a way of life, a way of moving into freedom. One way we take up our cross is through the waters of our baptism. There, we are marked with the cross of Christ.

In this mark, we are claimed and identified as disciples – ones who live, walk, and yes, even die by the cross. This marking within our lives leads us into places we never thought or imagined possible. For example, back in August, the Lancaster newspaper was filled with articles about Glen Lapp. While I did not know Glen personally, I have been impressed in reading the stories of him of how Glen left the comforts not only of family and friends, but the comfort of Lancaster County to take up the cross of discipleship by following Jesus in Afghanistan.

Following Jesus, discipleship, and taking up our cross go hand in hand with our daily work. Later in the service, we will affirm our daily work as a reminder that all of our work, all of our play, whether at home, or in the office, or in our studies is a gift from God.

Martin Luther had much to say about daily work being one’s calling, and how one lived out their discipleship through daily work. For Luther, even something as simple as changing a baby’s diaper was how one lived out one’s calling, one’s discipleship, one’s cross. Luther argued a person could look at changing a baby’s diaper as being extremely displeasing and distasteful, something that was beneath him or her. Luther continued with the argument that a person thinking this way would also think life would be better having no family responsibilities and becoming either a monk or a nun.

But Luther continued with “Christian faith. . .opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels.. I know for certain this child meets with your perfect pleasure. I confess I am not worthy to rock the little babe, or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother.

How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving your most precious will? O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost, nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in your sight.” (*Luther’s Works, Vol. 45, pg. 60*)

We often think that taking up our cross has to do with a chronic illness, a painful physical condition, or trying family relationships. Instead, taking up our cross is what we do voluntarily. It is our commitment to Jesus Christ. It is a commitment that is not only a way of life, but also a commitment to a person.

The challenges of taking up our cross are many. First, taking up our cross demands one hundred percent totality on our parts, rather than a half hearted response. Jesus knew this, and knew also that some in the crowds who followed were not really interested in following him. Some followed out of curiosity, to see who would be healed next, or what the next conflict would be with religious leaders. Knowing this, Jesus tells the story of someone who built a building and did not estimate how much it would cost to finish the project. Building a building without an idea of how much it will cost is problematic. Doing so could run into problems, either in terms of expenses, or in finishing the project in a timely matter.

In the same way, following Jesus without counting the cost beforehand can be problematic. Discipleship is *not* for the faint of heart.

A second challenge of discipleship is that discipleship demands obedience. The obedience that discipleship demands is not a blind obedience to Something that we do not know much about. This obedience is an obedience that challenges us in the everyday living of our discipleship.

Third, the cost of discipleship requires we make a decision: a decision between life and death, a decision between whom we will serve and whom we will not serve. Moses spells this out to the Israelites in our first lesson today. The Israelites are about to enter the promised land, but Moses will not be going with them. Moses reminds the Israelites of the promises they have made to God, how God has led them out of Egypt. Moses reminds the Israelites now that they are entering the promised land, they have a choice – to choose life and God’s ways, or to choose death – and walk away from God’s ways. Walking away from God’s ways can be like the chaff which the Psalmist refers to. The dry, brittle, dusty unconnected parts of the plant that blow away after the harvest – similar to the “chaff” which we’ve seen over the past few days as the harvest has been brought in.

With these requirements for taking up the cross of discipleship, making a commitment of this sort can be overwhelming. It can be comparable to making a commitment to an organization only to learn later the expectations are not what we thought they would be, or that we do not have the time for them like we thought we would.

In spite of the challenges, there is also much beauty in taking up our cross and following Jesus. One of the beauties is that we are not asked to do something Jesus has not already done. Jesus knew what was ahead of Him in Jerusalem. Jesus knew the cross was part of God’s salvation for you, for me, for the rest of the world. Knowing what was ahead of him, Jesus knows firsthand what is being asked of us – to sacrifice everyone in order to follow him.

Second, when we take up our cross and follow Jesus, we do not pick up our cross alone. It is a cross we bear together. The cross challenges our understanding of what it means to be a Christian, and what it means to take up our crosses and follow. When we bear the weight of the crosses, when we carry each other’s burdens, the weight of these crosses becomes easier to bear.