Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/8/2009, Lent 2B
Mark 8:31-38

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

> 34And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

This is a sermon about taking up our cross and following Jesus. I do not want this to be a highfaluting sermon, so I mean to begin by speaking of plates and pots. Or rather, I am going to begin by letting that golden-tongued preacher St. John Chrysostom speak to us of such things. He says this:

> Do you feel upset when you drop a plate or a pot, and it smashes into tiny pieces on the ground? Do you feel anxious when a strong wind is blowing, and you can hear the tiles on your roof coming loose?[1] Do you feel worried about the crops in your field when it rains so hard that the ground is flooded? Do you feel frightened at night when you hear a door click or squeak, wondering if robbers have come to steal your goods? To feel those things is quite normal. Yet the challenge of our faith is that we become so indifferent to material possessions that nothing of this kind can concern us. Of course while we remain on this earth, we must have plates on which to serve our food, roofs above our heads to keep us dry, crops growing in the fields to feed us, and some basic pieces of furniture in our homes. But if we work hard day by day to the best of our abilities, we can be sure that God will provide what we need. And if something is broken, lost, or stolen, God will decide if and when to replace it.[2]

And so it is that Chrysostom takes seriously the words of our Lord Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount:

---

[1] Well, this is an example that hits close to home for us here at Immanuel, since the engineers say we need a new roof over our dear church.

[2] *On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom*, compiled by Robert Van de Weyer (Triumph Books: Liguori, Missouri, 1996), pg. 13.

> [25]Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?
>
> [26]Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?
>
> [27]Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?
>
> [28]And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:
>
> [29]And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.
>
> [30]Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? (Matthew 6:25-30, KJV)

This too is part of what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus: it means that when the plate falls and dashes against the floor, we will not fall to pieces along with that plate. Else, what good is our faith? Why should not the onlookers think to themselves, "Ahh! These Christians speak of faith, heavenly treasures, and eternity, but see how they grieve over the loss of a plate or cup in this earthly life. I wonder how their faith actually helps them."

Judging by the grammar of our text, there is a cross waiting for each of us. Jesus does not count cross-bearing to be an option for the Christian, as if, if luck is with us, we might go our whole life and miss it. He does not say, "If you would come after me, *and if perchance* a cross should come your way, then bear it and follow me." No, he speaks more simply: If you would come after me, deny yourself, take up *your* cross and follow me."

There have been horrible seasons of human history in which taking up the cross and follow Jesus might have meant a very heavy cross indeed. To illustrate that, I want to speak a bit about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was an important twentieth-century Lutheran theologian. But then, after that, I want to speak of cross-bearing in our own times, when following Christ might not mean death for us, as it did for Bonhoeffer, but it might mean that we press on as calmly as we can amidst these economic and vocational troubles, denying sinful impulses in ourselves, forgiving and uplifting others as best we can.

So, first, about Bonhoeffer. As I read aloud this morning's Gospel story just a few moments ago, I read it with a certain measure of sorrow in my heart, for

this was the very Bible passage Bonhoeffer quoted, verse for verse, in the introduction to his chapter on "Discipleship and the Cross." The chapter appears in Bonhoeffer's great book *The Cost of Discipleship.* The cause for sorrow is simply the grief our world could well feel at the death of such a good man -- a man who took the words of Jesus about the cross with such earnestness and with such joy.

Bonhoeffer was only thirty-nine years old when he was executed by S.S. Black Guards in 1945. His death was a final burst of wickedness and deprived our world of a someone I think we needed and who by rights should have gone on writing theology and serving Christ for another forty or fifty years.

Bonhoeffer was thirty-one years old when he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*. I remember such days of youth and still live them to some degree, as do many of you -- days when you think you will accomplish great things, when your future lies before you, when you are conscious of some strength and talent and you are eager to do some good in this world. So, at age thirty-one, Bonhoeffer methodically wrote the following words in the Introduction to his great book. He wrote these words, I am sure, because he judged them to be true. And they *are* true. Still, it is sad and awe-inspiring to think of the ultimate meaning that such words can have in life. Bonhoeffer wrote this:

> And if we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What *decisions and partings* will it demand? To answer this question we shall have to go to him, for only he knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows the journey's end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.[3](My emphasis)

For Bonhoeffer, taking up the Cross and following Jesus meant many things, including founding and leading an underground theological seminary. In the end, it also meant participating in a plot to assassinate Hitler -- a plot about which Bonhoeffer anguished, and also a plot that failed. Bonhoeffer could not always claim that he absolutely knew the will of Christ in detail or that his path was clear to him in this modern world. But he could claim that if following Christ should expose the Christian to suffering, one should accept that suffering if thereby one could remain close to Jesus. And so it is that Bonhoeffer tried to face up to the call of Jesus in this morning's Gospel Lesson: Take up your cross and follow me. He did so calmly, with faith and friendliness toward others, so that even when the guards came to lead him away to his execution, he seemed

---

[3] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, translated from the German *Nachfolge*, first published 1937 (Macmillian: New York, 1963), pg. 41.

unafraid and encouraging toward his fellow prisoners. Even as he left them behind for his death, he spoke kind words to them.

Bonhoeffer claims that true grace is "costly grace," not cheap grace:

> Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.[4]

And so, Bonhoeffer believed that there is a "cost" to be paid in following Christ, but, in the end, he believed it to be a joyful cost. The cost is renunciation of self in favor of single-minded obedience to Christ, together with suffering whatever blows such obedience might bring us in this world. And the joy in the cost is that we come until Christ, take his yoke upon us, and find rest for our souls.

As Bonhoeffer sorted things out, the cross means two things for Christians: First, it means that the Christian is called to renunciation of everything that leads us away from Christ. And so we come to probably the most famous passage in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

> The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world.... When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die... only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ.[5]

And second, the cross means bearing up others, including forgiving them:

> He becomes the bearer of other men's burdens -- "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ"(Gal. 6:2) As Christ bears our burdens, so ought we to bear the burdens of our fellow-men. The law of Christ, which it is our duty to fulfil, is the bearing of the cross... Thus the call to follow Christ always means a call to share the work of forgiving men their sins. Forgiveness is the Christlike suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear.[6]

---

[4] Ibid, page 48. Bonhoeffer is quoting St. Paul: KJV For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.(I Corinthians 6:20, KJV)

[5] Ibid., pg 99.

[6] Ibid., pg. 100.

So, let me speak some of these two forms of cross-bearing in our city, in our modern world. First, I mean to speak of renunciation. And second, I mean to speak of bearing up others.

In these confusing and disheartening economic times, one of the first things you should renounce is despair. You might have been seeking a job for a long time now -- longer than you had prepared for, longer that you could afford. You might have faithfully checked Craig's List for jobs, researched possible employers, sent out resumes, and interviewed with enthusiasm and bright eyes, yet you remain disappointed. Here you are trying to be Christ's man, Christ's woman, yet things are not working out for you.

I hope it might comfort you to know that there are grey-haired Christians who have known similar hard times in life - times when the blessings of God seemed gone - and yet they reached the other side safely nonetheless. And then, looking back, they were able to see that even in those hard times, they were upheld by the everlasting arms of God.

I know it is hard to apply Chrysostom's quaint saying about the broken plate to ourselves when we are speaking of something so important as our vocation, but he is on to something. Remember how his passage concluded:

> But if we work hard day by day to the best of our abilities, we can be sure that God will provide what we need. And if something is broken, lost, or stolen, God will decide if and when to replace it.

The man is trying to be faithful to the words of Jesus, who promises us that God will indeed provide for us, that not a hair of our head shall be lost without him knowing, and that he means only good things for us.

So, renounce despair. Do not linger in bed, lost in despondency. Get up, press on. This world needs you to continue to seek a vocation and a job. We need it both for your sake and for ours. This is not a cross so heavy as Christ's, nor Bonhoeffer's, but it does seem a true case of cross-bearing for Christ.

And second, in these tough times, we should probably renounce luxury and waste. Let us remember that Jesus was a poor man, and that his earliest followers included many poor people, yet they knew joy nonetheless and they trained themselves in the ways of simplicity.

The old folks had a saying: "Waste not, want not." It was a saying that many of our grandparents lived by. For Carol's grandmother, Margaret Zembower, for example, that saying had become a rule of life. It adorned all her activity, without her even thinking about it. When she stood at the sink and washed out a coffee cup, for example, she did not let the water run while she turned to chat with a member of the family. No, she turned off that water because she did not want to waste any of it. It's a small thing, but of such things are peaceful lives built - even modest fortunes built. Grandmother Zembower

was able to pass on to each of her many grandchildren a tidy sum of money that in turn became in our household the college fund for our boys. Grandmother never went to college. Many people of her generation never graduated from high school, but she was a grown up in this world and she was wise in her own way. She disciplined herself to live simply. I believe that such disciplines are becoming important again in these days, else how are we going to have money to support the orphans and the widows and to fulfill the responsibilities of love we have to our families and to others? Just as holding your tongue when you drop a plate can be a modest example of taking up your cross and following Jesus, so can practice of economy and simplicity be Christ-like in a world where many of us need to tighten our belts in order to take care of ourselves and others.

So, that is the first sense of bearing our cross in these troubling times: We should renounce despair and wastefulness.

The second meaning of the cross for us is that we should bear up our neighbor as best we can. And this is going to be increasingly important as our economic troubles continue. These economic and vocational troubles mean that you are going to have a lot of people in your life who are discouraged and agitated. They might, from time to time, be impatient with you. They might even sin against you. Anxiety drives us to such things: to impatience and to sin.

And so, part of what it means to follow Christ in this city and in these times is to bear up your neighbors. Though you yourself might be hurting, nonetheless try to encourage those around you who are hurting too. Give them encouragement, bear with their impatience, and if they should ask for your forgiveness, then grant it. Granting forgiveness does not mean that you consent to be a doormat, but it does mean that you consent to have good will toward that one as that one strives to live a repentant life.

If you lingered after church last Sunday, you would have seen a beautiful sight up here in the first row. I bet we had ten little children eager for their First Communion instruction. We mean to continue that instruction this morning after the liturgy. One of the things I will try to do with all my might is to help these little ones understand that when they come to the Blessed Sacrament, they are coming into the arms of the same Jesus who loves the little children and who gladly bears the Cross for them. That is true for you and me too. Each morning when Jesus wakes up, he takes up the Cross and bears it onwards. He will never stop, he will never give up, until he drags this world into the very Kingdom of God. And the theme of this Sunday's Gospel story is simply that we should be like him. In these days, and for the rest of our life, we should deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.