

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
9/13/2015, Holy Cross Sunday  
1 Corinthians 1:18-24, John 3:13-17  
Folly to the Greeks

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>23</sup>but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews  
and folly to Gentiles... (1 Corinthians 1:23, RSV)

Thursday of our recent Vacation Bible School was nice because I brought the children upstairs here to the nave to talk to them about Jesus. If you have not yet seen the photographs of our VBS staff and children on our church website, I think you will enjoy them when you do.<sup>1</sup> Those children are beautiful, as always. So is our staff! So, Thursday I brought the children upstairs to tell them about Jesus. I had our processional cross standing beside me and asked the children to point out all the figures of Jesus in our church. Their little arms dashed up. They pointed to the magnificent statue of Jesus in our altarpiece. They pointed aloft to Jesus in the center of our Transfiguration painting. And then they pointed to Jesus on this processional cross.

“How is this Jesus different from the others?” I asked them. They spoke of the cross. The Jesus in our altarpiece is majestic and calm, in his attitude of blessing. The Jesus in our Transfiguration painting is heavenly, revered by Moses and Elijah and the three apostles. But the Jesus on our processional cross is worn out. He is lean and stretched out, with his ribs showing just beneath his skin. His face is gaunt, his cheeks sunken, his head hangs forward, and his eyes are closed in death. It has not been easy for him to carry his cross.

Everywhere we go in the liturgy, the blessed cross leads the way. David Kiehl, Jeff Rudat, and Luc Randrian/arivony are our longtime crucifers, along with young Bobby Franzese. But Bobby has just headed off to college. He is starting his freshman year at the University of Michigan. And so we could use another person to join our roster of crucifers. It is an important symbol in the church. For here we are: one long procession of cross-bearers.

## **TAKE UP YOUR CROSS**

Long ago, Jesus said to his Twelve disciples and to everyone in sight that they were to bear a cross:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.immanuelnyc.org/photosmedia/photos/vacation-bible-school-2015>

And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Mark 8:34, KJV)

It is interesting how St. Mark phrases the matter here. Jesus summons the multitude to him, because what he has to say about the cross is not meant just for the Twelve disciples, but for everyone willing:

*Whosoever* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

Let us take it to heart even in our day. This same Jesus is risen from the dead. He stands among us, where two or three are gathered in his name:

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20, RSV)

With sacred imagination, then, let us picture Jesus among us, looking gently upon us, looking into our eyes and searching our hearts and bidding us to take up our cross.

## **BONHOEFFER**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book on *Discipleship* reminds us that the Cross is not held off until the end of life for the Christian, but comes right at the start of our walk with Jesus. Bonhoeffer puts his point this way:

The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death.<sup>2</sup>

There is no need for us to going around searching for a cross. There is no need to create difficulties for ourselves in following Jesus. Difficulties will come of their own will and at their own pace. But when they come, we face the choice to draw nearer to Christ or to begin walking away. Let us not walk away.

For the merchant, the cross immediately laid upon him or her might be Christ's call to some modification of business practice – perhaps to producing more excellent goods, perhaps to adjusting their price, perhaps to a more supportive relationship to employees, perhaps to beginning the long process of rebuilding the firm's reputation in the direction of high integrity and fairness.

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<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich (2003-05-28). *Discipleship*, DBW Vol 4 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works) (p. 87). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

For the bored worker, the cross might be the call to stop coasting and to return to the labors and the virtues that make one even more excellent in work.

For those who are caught up in crime or vice – tax evasion or drunkenness or adultery or gambling away money needed for the family table – the Cross comes soon on the scene. Jesus comes upon us casting our nets into the sea, he bids us follow him, and immediately we must begin stopping our crimes and our vices. The Cross has come to us.

## WISDOM AND CLEVERNESS

In this morning's text, St. Paul warns of a more strange Cross. He speaks of things that ordinarily are good: cleverness and wisdom. He quotes the saying of the Lord from Isaiah 29[14]:

<sup>19</sup>For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart." (1 Corinthians 1:19, RSV)

The apostle seems to be warning us that an uncomfortable Cross might well fall upon the most learned and respected of us: the Cross of being thought out of step with things, the Cross of being thought foolish in the eyes of respectable folk.

Paul himself seems to struggle with this Cross. In his generation and among his people, the Jews, he was a learned and respected leader. But when he becomes a Christian and begins preaching to the elegant Corinthians, he seems unlearned. He is not impressive. He is not a master of rhetoric. He is not a persuasive preacher. He is not a Chrysostom, he is not a Spurgeon. People by the thousands do not crowd his church to hear him speak.

Furthermore, his message is nonsense to the ears of many sophisticated Greeks. What is this new teaching about a God who becomes fully and forever human? And if this God should become fully and forever human, why hasn't he conquered much? Hercules did. Why doesn't this Jesus? And what is this you say, Paul? You say that he was crucified? What a miserable and low way for Jesus to die? Do you expect us to worship *him* as worshiping God himself?

And so, St. Paul and his message concerning a crucified God were often dismissed by the learned and sophisticated. It seems that it was the humble folk who took to the message about Jesus, about how good the man was, how full of love and gentleness he was, and how he is resurrected from the dead. It is a mystery why they believed, but they did. This story of Jesus – his life, death, and resurrection – struck a chord with them as being this world's deepest truth. They believed, passed on their faith to their children and neighbors, all the way to you and me. We are the two-thousand-year descendents of these early Christians, led by the Holy Spirit to believe much as they believed.

## LOOKING FOOLISH

And thereby, we are exposed to the same Cross that St. Paul spoke of: the Cross of being thought foolish in the eyes of a sophisticated world.

So be it! If that is one of the Crosses we must bear, let us put our backs into it.

This does not mean that everything will be clear for us as we take up our Cross and follow Jesus. Some things will be immediately obvious: If we are pirates, or bank robbers, or kidnappers, we are going to have to give it up, take our punishment, and try to get back on track.

But sometimes things are less clear for the Christian. The Cross has come, but it is not particularly clear what is to be done. Christians of good conscience might disagree. Disciples of Jesus – every one of them trying to be true to Jesus – might disagree about what bearing the Cross means. They want to do it. They want to take up their Cross and follow our Lord. But some of their brothers and sisters in the Lord incline one way, and some the other.

I have been thinking about this a lot lately. Especially I have been thinking about the soul-searching conflict in the early church that reached its summit in what is called the Jerusalem Conference. We read about that Conference in Acts 15 and in Galatians 2. The chief leaders of the dispute seem to have been St. Paul and St. James. Forgive me, St. Peter, but as Paul tells the story you seem to have waffled. Your stance seems to have varied depending on whether you were standing near St. James or St. Paul.

The issue at dispute concerned the very heart and soul of the young Christian movement. Nothing we decide here at Immanuel will be equal to this early dispute. Should *Christians* continue the self-identifying disciplines of the *Jews*, especially circumcision and certain dietary laws? James said Yes: Christians must continue to identify themselves as Jews. Paul said No: circumcision is not necessary for Christians. St. Peter went back and forth. Maybe in another sermon I will try to develop how dramatic this choice is. I keenly feel something of the conflict in play. We are talking about continuity between the young church and ancient Israel – a continuity that certainly the church must try to maintain, and yet *how* to do it? Must continuity include circumcision?

Acts 15 gives us a snapshot of the solemn deliberative assembly in which these things were sorted out. The apostles spoke up. Peter spoke, Paul spoke. Barnabas spoke. James spoke. They gave their witness, they shared with others what was on their heart. They disagreed with one another, yet they were all trying to take up their cross and follow Christ, they all tried to deal with one another with gentleness and respect, and in the end they reached a definite conclusion and lived with it. They were able to share their conclusion with the great words, “It seems good to us and to the Holy Spirit that...” (Acts 15:28)

Sometimes, it seems, the call to take up the Cross and follow Jesus is also a call to talk with one another about what being true to Jesus means. If so, then let us talk to one another with love in our hearts and in our words. Let us try to credit each other with piety, logic, commonsense, and with godly desire all around to

grow in faith and to walk near to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.