

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/18/2016, Holy Cross Sunday
Exodus 32:7-14, Luke 15:1-10

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

Our Lord's call to take up the cross and follow him is not a call reserved for the apostles, but for *anyone* who would follow him. The call to the cross is not meant just for the saints and holy ones of this world, but is also meant for you and for me. The cross: that is our subject this morning, Holy Cross Sunday. We Christians are to be cross-bearers – a great, long procession of folks whose backs bend somewhat under the weight of the holy cross. It is to be with us as Jesus said long ago:

... If *any* man [*any* woman] will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.
(Luke 9:23, KJV)

Let me begin our discussion of the cross by referring to a passing liturgical action I do every time we celebrate the Holy Communion. This particular action is a true case of what the Lutheran Reformers called "adiaphora." That means church usages that are neither commanded nor forbidden by the Bible (Formula of Concord, X). In one sense, then, adiaphora are matters of indifference. We are not guilty of disobeying the Lord one way or the other, whether we do them or neglect them. But precisely for this reason, maybe these indifferent matters are the most important for us. They are the deeds where our faith gets to shine the most. I mean, if we are *commanded* or *forbidden* by God to do something, then the matter is settled. It is precisely where things are not settled that we get to rise up and give it our own best shot at pleasing the Lord.

So, the particular adiaphora I have on my mind now concerns the question, "Who communes first?" Here at Immanuel, I commune first.

Not all clergy do it this way. Some clergy commune others first and themselves last of all. I certainly respect that. It accords with the saying of Jesus about humility:

For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 14:11, RSV)

Also, we hear our Lord's call to humility in the oft-repeated saying about the "first" and the "last":

So the last will be first, and the first last. (Matthew 20:16, RSV)

So, I certainly respect clergy who commune themselves last of all. I admire their humility.

Yet, I commune myself first of all. Why?

Well, it is because of a historical note – something having to do with the early church and the days of persecution. If I understand things right, the Roman soldiers were told that they could distinguish the priest, not by his robes, but by the fact that he communed first. “Arrest *that* man!” the marching orders would say. The soldiers could not depend on the robes, since clergy might not have had stoles and chasubles like modern clergy do. But it was easy enough to see who communed first. Arrest that man!

Now, I might have this historical note all wrong. But perhaps you can see my point anyway. I commune myself first in case the days of persecution should break out again. If anyone is to be arrested, it is to me. I will not endanger the lives of anyone else in the liturgy.

Small danger, I know. So far here in our land, there is little risk that priests will be arrested. But they were in the past. And they were killed in the past for their faith. I honor those clergy. They were willing to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus. I want to take my stand with them, and so I commune myself first.

Perhaps it is a silly example. Real church historians and liturgical scholars might think my notion absurd. But it is my notion, and it occurs to me that it is of such daily deeds – big and small – that Christian life consists. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. This is not mere poetry. This is to be the pattern of our life day by day.

Between the two of them – between denying ourselves and taking up our cross – the holy cross seems harder. Denying ourselves means letting the will of our Maker prevail in our life. It means letting the will of God overmaster our own will. It means that we submit our lives to God and make the moving words of Jesus our own:

...Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me:
nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. (Luke 22:42, KJV)

Not “my” will, but “thine” be done. My will is for a red Mustang with stick shift. But the will of God for me might well be something very different. Denying *myself*, then, would mean yielding to the will of God for me. I bet that will of God includes many responsibilities, including taking care of my family and my church and giving to the poor. I might not have enough money left

over for a red Mustang with a stick shift. I haven't had enough money so far. Who knows whether I ever will?

My will is to eat half the mixing bowl of chocolate chip cookie batter. But I've been there, done that, and I note that it leaves me sluggish. Meanwhile the apostle calls us to count our body as being the very temple of the Lord:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-21, RSV)

That is why I do not smoke. As I understand the Bible, our Maker wants us to take care of our own bodies. So denying *myself* in the matter of food and exercise means conforming my will to the will of God for me.

Now, the reason I say that denying ourselves is easier than taking up the cross is that denying ourselves in favor of God's will for us will prove to be for our own benefit, for God wills only good for us. The Lord does not want us to indulge in wrath, for example. He wants us to relax the angry fist. He wants us to restrain the angry tongue. He wants us to remember the teaching of the apostle:

For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. (James 1:20, KJV)

Experience has taught many of us that it is best for us to obey the Lord here. Plenty of people have regretted the day that they ignored the will of God, and instead gave way to their own wrathful will and wrathful ways. Denying ourselves in favor of God's will can save us from jail, save us from a world of trouble, save us from hurting people in this world.

So denying ourselves in favor of God's will for us is not only a faithful way of life, but also a wise way of life for us. It will spare us and our neighbors from a lot of misery, since the will of God for us is that we should flourish. It is as our Lord Jesus says:

I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more *abundantly*. (John 10:10, KJV)

Taking up the holy cross in our lives is a different matter. The cross is precisely that which we must *suffer* in order to be true to Jesus. In big ways and in little ways, the cross means suffering. The cross does not tend toward our flourishing, but our breaking down. Jesus, after all, suffered and died on the cross.

The haunting theme of Bonhoeffer is right: Following Jesus could well require a cost of us:

Above all, it [grace] 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.¹

And so it is that sometimes it comes our way in life that we must make up our minds. We can see how things are shaping up: If we are going to be true to Jesus, there is going to be a cost to be paid. Sometimes walking with Jesus is pleasant. We know something of the joy of which St. Peter speaks:

...joy unspeakable and full of glory: (1 Peter 1:8, KJV)

But sometimes being true to Jesus is hard. Adolescents risk being mocked or ostracized for following Jesus. In fact, perhaps it is the young who fight some of the fiercest spiritual battles on earth. The angels in heaven look on and cheer them as they try to remain true to Jesus though they would like nothing more than to simply fit in with their peers. No one much minds if a priest wears a clerical collar and a cross on a necklace and speaks of Jesus from time to time. But for a teenager trying to fit in, it can be brave indeed to speak of Jesus and to try to live for him. The cross is not reserved just for grown-ups. Our young ones face it too, and we should pray for them.

But for all this... for all the mocking and awkwardness, even for persecution and arrest, even for death... for all this possible suffering, Jesus says to us: deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. It is his way. It was his path. He trembled before that path in Gethsemane, but he took up his cross and carried it all the way to the end, embracing that cross as if he were embracing us. And he was! His arms were extended on the cross, embracing the whole world, surrendering his own welfare for our eternal life.

Now, on Holy Cross Sunday, Jesus asks us to follow his pattern. St. Paul acknowledges that in the reckoning of the world, the way of the cross is foolishness. In a selfish world where the most final good is some good state of ourselves, the way of the cross can only be nonsense. But it is not nonsense! The apostle is right. The strange way of the cross is this world's true wisdom, for it is the way of Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, translated by R.H. Fuller (MacMillan Publishing Company: New York, 1937), page 48.