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

This is Holy Cross Sunday. My opening verse speaks of the cross. It is from our Epistle Reading. So this is St. Paul, First Corinthians 1:18. The apostle writes this:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:18, RSV)

Let me begin this sermon on the cross by repeating a story from one of my sermons from twenty years ago. It is a story about someone who stood in the power of God — an ordinary man, like many of us ordinary men and women, boys and girls. The story is found in a book by an American Benedictine nun named Joan Chittister.¹ The story goes like this:

As the army occupied the village, many of the soldiers showed great cruelty in regard to the subjugated people. The most chosen objects of their atrocities were the monastics. So as foreign forces invaded the small towns and hamlets, the monastics fled to the mountains.

When the invaders arrived in one of the villages, however, the leader of the village reported to the commander, “All the monastics, hearing of your approach, fled to the mountains.”

And the commander smiled a broad, cold smile, for he was proud of having a reputation for being a very fearsome person.

But then the leader added, “All that is, but one.”

The commander became enraged. He marched to the monastery and kicked in the gate. There in the courtyard stood the one remaining monastic. The commander glowered at the figure. “Do you not know who I am?” the commander demanded. “I am he who can run you through with a sword without batting an eyelash.”

¹ In this sermon, I repeat the story from my sermon for Holy Cross Sunday 1999, along with my comments on that story. But in this sermon, I want to take the story in another direction. In particular, I want to lift up that our faith in the God who loves us should be an active faith — brave and pure and willing to contend against sin.
And the monastic fixed the commander with a serene and patient look and said, “And do you not know who I am? I am one who can let you run me through with a sword without batting an eyelash.”

Now, here stands a man of faith, whose faith is brave. This monastic puts his confidence in the cross of Christ. For him, the cross is not folly, but the very power of God. The man echoes a cry of confidence we can find in the Psalms. It goes this way:

The LORD is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me? (Psalm 118:6, KJV)

It is as if the monk contemplates Jesus and is encouraged in doing so, so that he stands up to the enemy commander. We can almost hear him say to himself, “Jesus is on my side; I will not fear: what can this soldier do unto me?”

The other monks run away, and God bless them every one; let them go in peace. They probably have good reasons for fleeing, even plausible theological arguments for running to the mountains. If I had been a monk in that village, I fear that I would have run away too, for I would have thought to myself, “Life is sweet.” But here stands this monk — a man who introduces a new possibility in life: the possibility that one need not flee away before tyrants and evil doers. We cannot know every motive of this monastic’s heart, and yet maybe it is the power of the cross at work at him. Maybe he too thinks to himself that “Life is sweet,” and yet he has found Jesus Christ to be sweeter still. Indeed, it appears that he has found Christ to be dearer than life itself.

Well, in staying, the monk had work to do. It is the job of the monastic to pray for a world in need of prayer, and to witness to Jesus Christ. If enemies were invading the village, then there was need for prayer, that lives and property should be preserved. The village folk could be encouraged by the public example of a monk who stayed and continued the prayers. Also, there may be violence and injury when enemy soldiers come to town, and so a monk trained in charity, especially if he knew first aid and medicine, would be a real blessing for the people. And then there was the daily labor of tending the monastery. There was good work to be done, time was wasting, and so the monk remained behind in the monastery, when other people ran away. There stood the man, continuing with his work in spite of the huffing and puffing of the enemy soldiers.

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In standing there, especially before the angry commander, the monk was risking death. Now, no one should be casual about death. Life is precious, from first to last, and should not be recklessly lost. And yet there is something even greater than our life... greater than our comforts, plans, hopes and dreams. There is the One to whom the Christian is bound through baptism. That is, Jesus Christ.

Here is our rugged cross from our Good Friday liturgy. It leans against our Eucharistic table for this Holy Cross Sunday. Sometimes we trace the sign of the cross upon our bodies. Martin Luther encouraged Christians to do that — to make the sign of the cross first thing in the morning and then again at the end of the day, thereby framing our days in the name of Jesus. The rich man, the poor woman, and the little child, we all have the right by baptism to wake up in the morning, and trace the sign of the cross of Christ upon ourselves. In this way we preach to ourselves who we are, our identity, and we remind ourselves that we belong to Jesus, whatever the storms or temptations of life.

We do not know what became of this particular monk. Maybe he was run through with the sword right there on the spot, with the commander never even batting an eyelash. Be that as it may, the commander cannot say that he did not meet an extraordinary man that day. Later in the week, when the commander is drinking his beer with fellow officers, he will have an interesting story to tell. He will be able to speak of a man who seemed to fear him less than he feared to fail his true commander — One named Jesus. And when the beer drinking is done, the battles fought, the years passed, and the time of death draws near for the commander, maybe he will bring to mind again this lonely monk who showed him something of the cross of Christ. Maybe he will bring to mind again, in the hastening of his days, something of the power of God—that power which can convert a mild man into a lion for the good. Yes, he might well remember that power of the cross which can forge a threatened man into a Christian worker undeterred in his duty.

My theme for this sermon is that our faith should be akin to that of this lonely monastic, to the degree that his faith and his character resembled that of Jesus. Our faith should be brave and pure and willing to contend against the sin that keeps trying to drag us down. Our circumstances are different from the monastic of long ago. And yet our hearts and faith should be of that sort — the sort of faith that is brave and pure.

Let me share with you one of Martin Luther’s picturesque sayings about the cross:

If you wish to be a joint heir with the Lord Jesus Christ and yet not suffer with Him, to be His brother and yet not become conformed to Him, He will certainly not acknowledge you on the Last Day as a brother and joint heir. He will ask you where your crown of thorns, your
cross, nails, and scourge are...If, then, you cannot produce this evidence, He will not be able to consider you His brother. To sum it up, we must suffer with Him, and all must be made to conform to the Son of God... or we shall not be exalted with Him to glory. (What Luther Says, No. 1056)

Luther believed that faith should change the heart. Faith should help make us brave and pure and ready to contend against sin and the troubles our poor world endures.

One of the most famous Lutherans of the twentieth century believed that too. I am speaking of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Faith changed his heart, leading him to oppose the Nazi regime all the way to his death. Listen to one of the famous passages from his great book The Cost of Discipleship:

[True] 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.” (p. 48) The cross is laid on every Christian... Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship p. 99)

The reason I am lifting up such solemn passages about the cross of Christ is that I want to invite us into a great adventure — the adventure of bearing in our lives the holy cross of Christ.

In our Gospel Lesson, we read the splendid words of Jesus that he did not come to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. Well, our job is to be part of this saving of the world — not the ignoring of the world or the harming of the world, but the saving of the world. We are to bear the holy cross so that we lend a hand to the love of Christ for our world. We are not simply to sit back and say to ourselves, “Great! Jesus has not come to condemn the world. He has not come to judge and condemn but rather to save. He is this world’s great Man of love.” All of that is true, and yet we should permit these great words to draw us, each of us, into his way of love and his manner of life. Listen to how Luther puts it:

[Christ] wants us to accept Him; He does not want us to hate the light; He wants us to become new persons, to cleave to Him with all our heart, to rely on Him, and to say: “Thou didst not come to condemn me but to save me.” People will believe in Him; yet at the same time they will
want to retain their old nature. But this is not the way. Those who are addicted to vice cannot love or follow Christ, for Christ and Belial cannot reside side by side. Faith must change the heart.  

To my mind, there is a very lovely, but simple line in this passage. It goes this way: “He [Christ] wants us become new persons.” That is what happened to that lonely monk so many centuries ago. He became a new person — a new kind of person on earth. He became the kind of person who could face the sword, but remain undeterred in his life of love. “I am one who can let you run me through with a sword without batting an eyelash,” he says. This is new! This is hopeful. This is someone who so permits Christ to enter his heart that his life is changed for the good — for his good, but also for good of his neighbors. And as Jesus said concerning the Good Samaritan, “Go, and do thou likewise” (Luke 10:37, KJV)

In the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

\[3\] Luther, commentary on John 3:16ff.