

Cross Bearing: The Cost of Grace

The Second Sunday in Lent
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31;
Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was a kid, we lived directly across the street from the fire house. That was really cool, because if I were home and the siren sounded, I could run to the front room, dive onto the couch, and press my nose against the window. From there I could watch the action – the volunteers running down the street, the great doors of the fire house swinging open, and finally the emergence of the fire truck, with one of the men cranking the hand powered siren for all he was worth.

If I was good and the men were working on one of the trucks at the station, I was allowed to go across the street and sit in a corner and watch from close quarters. And if I were really, really good, they might just lift me up on to the truck and let me crank the siren. Not for long – but long enough to get any kid’s blood rushing!

Surely it got the disciples’ blood rushing to be in the presence of Jesus. Breath-taking, in fact. There they were, in the presence of Jesus – but there was even more. Oh, I know, there was much they didn’t understand, and there was much they had to learn before they got to the end of the gospel story, but there they were – face to face with the living, breathing Messiah; the one they had waited for down through the centuries, since the rule of David. Here they were, in His presence.

After seeing Jesus perform amazing healings, after being part of His feeding of the five thousand and then the four thousand, it was as they are journeying toward Caesarea Philippi that Jesus stops them, and turns around and asks them, “Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am?”

Who did His followers think He was? It’s Peter who gets it right. He just blurts out that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. And there they are in the Messiah’s living, breathing, presence.

It is sometimes hard for us to believe, but when we gather together like this in worship, we are once again in His living, breathing presence. Oh I know you want to tell me you can’t feel it or you don’t notice it, but it hasn’t anything to do with feeling – it has everything to do with the almighty power and presence of God in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, I know, it’s hard to believe that. We think of all the reasons why that shouldn’t be: because of our unworthiness, or our shortcomings, or our failures, and we find it next to impossible that we could be in His presence, let alone be forgiven. Let alone actually being made whole. Let alone being absolutely and fully renewed. Sometimes unbelievable, but always true.

It was unbelievably true for me one evening, when Rob Kozicki, a member of our congregation and Chief of the Camp Hill Fire Department, stopped by to sit on my porch. (*You're always welcome to stop by and sit on the porch when I'm there.*) We chatted for a while, and then he said that the men in the fire company had been thinking it would be a good idea to have a chaplain again. And then he popped the question - "Would you be our chaplain?" I said, "Yes!" It was a childhood dream come true! Who would say no to that? So I've been going to training and attending meetings and helping out as best as I am able - marking out hose lengths, polishing a truck, carrying gear from the old ladder truck to the new ladder truck. And believe me - that is hard work. I don't think there was one piece of equipment that weighs less than half-a-ton! (At least that's how it felt to me.) And, as uncomfortable as it is, I am slowly learning that 90% of a fireman's lot is hard, filled with physical work and exhaustion. But I was so focused on the glamour, the sirens, the red lights, riding on the trucks . . .

Clearly, the disciples were also focused on the glory and the wonder and the splendor of their being in the Messiah's presence. At least He was the Messiah, according to Peter. And it's then that Jesus gathers them around, and sits them down and instructs them, along with the crowd. If they were expecting wonderful news, what Jesus actually said left them stunned and shocked. He said first that He "must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed." What He said next, that "after three days rise again," was lost under the weight of His announcement of His forthcoming suffering, arrest, trial, and death. It's all too much for Peter, and he gives voice to what I suspect was the opinion of all those around him, even though it was spoken in private - that somebody as glorious and magnificent and divine as the Messiah could not possibly . . . it was unthinkable that he should go through what he just said. Taking Jesus aside, Peter takes it upon himself to instruct Jesus in the proper form of Messiahship (sort of like a first century Emily Post) to which Jesus responds sharply, "Get behind me, Satan!" Then He followed up with a statement, not quite as sharp as the first but, surely just as puzzling. He said, Peter, you've got your head set on "human things" rather than "divine things."

The conflict here, of course, has little to do with who knows the future, but has everything to do with perception. Which person, Jesus or Peter, knows what things are "human things" and what things are "divine things"? You see, by the standards of wisdom that belong to human beings, anything like a cross for the Messiah is foolishness. But God chooses it as a way of wisdom. And Peter's repudiation of Jesus' prediction reveals that he operates entirely on a human level and that Peter does not yet understand what it means to say that Jesus is the Messiah. The remainder of the Gospel will continue to reinforce this portrait of Peter, who continually fails to grasp the necessity of Jesus' death.

The remainder of the Gospel also reinforces Mark's understanding of the Messiahship as including the very necessity of suffering and death. For unless the Messiah suffers with us and dies with us, how can He know what it is to be us? Take up your cross, Jesus says, and follow me. Take up our cross?

Slowly but surely our discomfort with this story grows as we begin to realize what it means to follow in the footsteps of our Lord and leave ourselves open to the very real prospects of pain, and suffering, and, yes, even death.

One popular preacher recently said to a bunch of preachers, “You cannot succeed by preaching the cross. People do not want to hear that; they already have enough problems.” No wonder he’s popular.

Jesus will have none of that. The way to the cross was not only for Himself, and not only for the Twelve, but for the multitudes and yes, brothers and sisters, for you and me. There’s no escaping the hard stuff here.

The point is we just cannot escape it. Suffering and sacrifice for one’s faith for others is not just a first century history thing, but it has real potential in each and every one of our lives.

Now don’t get me wrong. We are not to rush out from here and look for somewhere to suffer, or run out and inflict pain on ourselves. Rather Jesus reminds us, as He reminded Peter, to be prepared that when we journey from this place, along our journey we will encounter suffering and pain and yes, even death, in the midst of our faithfulness and following. Jesus reminds us, as He reminded Peter, that faithful Christian living is not a cake walk. Faithful Christians who expect the grace they have so freely received may, in fact, find that it costs them, and sometimes costs dearly. But it’s not pain or suffering that we are to bear alone.

Remember the promise from the Great Commission that we heard last week? As we move from worship into the world to actively live as Christ’s people, He is with us, not just part of the time, but always. Less dramatically put, we are asked to place Christ, and others, before ourselves. We are asked to give of ourselves, sacrificially, to walk the second mile, to turn the other cheek, to give our coat to the one who has no coat. It is in the midst of such faithful and sacrificial being that we finally discover that we are living. It’s just like love. If you want to be loved, the amazing thing is that you have to go out and love someone. And as you give your love away – guess what – we find ourselves beloved. As you risk all of your life to Christ and you seem to have lost it, then behold, your life has been found.

Once you understand, it’s just like the guys at the fire company. When the alarm is raised, when the pagers go off, they drop what they are doing, and hurry, safely, to the fire house. They don their heavy protective clothing, their heavy helmets, and they prepare to use the incredibly heavy equipment necessary to fight a fire. Oh, it is an adrenalin rush to ride the truck, to hear the siren wail, to sway with the vehicle, but at the end of the ride, there’s a fire to be fought, or an accident to be cleared, or lives to be saved. And there are terrible risks – fighting a fire inside a building when the floor suddenly fails, being struck by an inattentive motorist while you’re working at the scene of an accident, slipping or falling from a wet roof or a treacherous ladder – not that they set out to do that sort of thing, but when they answer a call, those sort of things are on the line; they are before them as their suffering and yes, even the threat of their giving up their lives. And still they answer the call. Still they go to the fire house. Still they are there, night and day.

Just so, Jesus is aware of what lay before Him, preparing His disciples for the trauma of Good Friday, and resolutely, lovingly, passionately, pursuing His ministry to the end. And that, beloved, is exactly where we are – trying to live out our faith, following Him as bravely and as best we can; ready to serve, yes, and even pay the price as we follow where our Lord has led.

For we know that our Lenten journey will eventually end in Easter. But before it does, beloved, we must pass through the Good Friday's of our lives.

Amen.