

## 11PENT2011 A (Pr. 17) "Living in the Shadow of the Cross"

Matt. 16:21-28

In our liturgy this morning we sang the song, "Come and gather beneath the tree of life..." and "Lay your burdens beneath the tree of life" and "Grace and pardon beneath the tree of life." Great song, good theology. But that does not mean that standing beneath the cross is a talisman for good luck and the sheltered life, free from trouble.

Some texts are mostly law...others mostly gospel. This text is mostly law. We live in the shadow of the cross and there we find shelter from the wrath of God. But that does not mean we are free from the troubles that following Jesus will create in our lives. The shadow of the cross still inflicts a cost in our lives....but that shadow is nothing compared to the protection it provides from the wrath of God against sin. But any trouble in life can easily be seen as something to avoid.

When you say good bye to your friends you often hear them say things like, "Be careful" or "Take care of yourself". When we feel stressed out from life's demands and work or relationships become exhausting we love to have someone say to us, "You don't deserve this trouble" or "You're working too hard" or "You need to take some time off". Often these words come from honest concern for our welfare but we like to hear them because of our deep seated desire to take care of ourselves, avoid suffering, protect ourselves. This natural instinct of self-preservation, left unchecked, easily grows to become obsession with self. We coddle and pamper and protect ourselves from work, from struggle, from suffering.

It is because we love ourselves so much that these words of Jesus in the text today hit us so hard.

**25 *"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*** "The life which Jesus proposes for us is a life given up, whose center and motive force are no longer our ego and its ambitions, but God and his will for the salvation of all people. It is a new mode of existence, it is true life." (Matthew Commentary, John Knox Press p. 96) So when Jesus said, "You must lose your life in order to find it..." we agree with Peter who

**22 *"...took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."*** Peter's rebuke to Jesus is on the surface a friend's concern, ***"God forbid!"*** "Have we also not sometimes heard the reassuring voice of a friend who tries to divert us from a difficult duty." (Ibid. p. 95) "There's nothing you can do"... "It is not your responsibility" .... "It's his (or her) life and he/she has to live with the consequences." But underneath this concern for a friend lies the temptation to go against the will of God.

F. D. Brunner in his commentary on this text writes: "What this encounter (between Jesus and Peter) teaches us is that we not only err when we follow our worst thoughts; we as often and more seriously err when we follow our best thoughts," (Brunner, Matthew, p. 585)

***24 "Then Jesus told his disciples, If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."***

There are contemporary movements in the church that say that if the church only becomes more accommodating to the culture it will grow. Therefore don't criticize, don't disagree, go along, get along. This is very attractive to us. It appeals to our natural instincts. We are attracted to those who question the necessity of trying to keep Jesus' hard commands at all. It is much easier to hear the soft words, "Protect yourself" "Don't stick your neck out" "Take care of yourself first". These slogans tempt us to take the easy way, our way, the world's way over God's way.

This text calls those who would follow Jesus to take up the way of the cross. But it also points to our inability to follow perfectly. We can all forget about perfection, it will not happen. Calvin, a contemporary of Luther and father of the Presbyterian Church, taught that the Xian life was found in OBEDIENCE to God's will.

Following Jesus is our calling. Luther taught that TRUST in God was the center of the Xian life. Put these two emphasis together and you get good theology...TRUST and OBEY. But trust must come first for our obedience is always partial, always tentative, always incomplete. Only when we trust in God do we dare to follow in costly obedience.

When the goal of the church or the Christian life is first of all to be successful, or popular, or accommodating to the world, it is called "Triumphalism".

Triumphalism has been called "the worldliness of the church" and is always a threat to the life of faith and obedience. (Brunner p. 585) The world is concerned with greatness and success, image and status. God is concerned with faithfulness, lowliness and service. This truth rankles us. It goes against every fiber of our being. So we relativize it, water it down, deny it every way we can, but the truth remains, for Jesus' word is truth,... ***25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.***

Luther called this a theology of the cross and it calls us to reject Triumphalism and to embrace the cross as our way of life. ***If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*** The encounter between Jesus and Peter hinges on the cross. Dr. F.D. Brunner, in his commentary on Matthew writes, "This cross, embraced, is the wood that charms its embracers but that, (if) rejected, demonizes." (p. 589). (*Repeat that again.*) He

goes on to illustrate this by quoting the German philosopher and journalist Heinrich Heine, who in the year 1839 uttered a prophetic warning of the dangers of "anti-cross" thinking when he wrote, "**The German philosopher can conjure up the demonic powers of German pantheism...Christianity, and this is its greatest accomplishment -- moderated somewhat that brutal Germanic lust for battle; but it could not destroy it, and if ever Christianity's restraining talisman, the cross, is shattered, there shall arise once more, that mindless madman's rage of which the Nordic poets sing so much. That talisman (of the cross) is decaying; the day will come when it collapses miserably.**" These words were prophetic. We all know what happened 100 years later from 1933-1945. Dietrick Bonhoeffer wrote in his book, "The Cost of Discipleship", "**When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.**" The theology of the cross rejects human Triumphalism in all its forms. "This cross, embraced, is the wood that charms its embracers but that, rejected, demonizes."

Jesus calls us to be people of the cross. Cross bearing self denial is not religious devotion, the giving up of sweets during Lent. Rather it is giving up on yourself as lord and trusting only in the unmerited mercy and grace of God who in Jesus forgives all your sins and sets you free. In this freedom you joyfully submit to your Lord's teachings about life. Only Jesus can reveal how that will work out in your life. But you can learn His will by reading and studying and conforming your life to His word. As Christians we need to listen to scripture and not the world.

St. Paul helps to flesh out this cross-bearing life-style in the Epistle lesson for today from Romans 12. St. Paul describes some specific ways to be a follower of Jesus. If you have your Bible take a look at Romans 12: 9-21 (or look at the insert in your bulletin) for a description of the cross-bearing life-style. Note what the Bible says in contrast to what the world says:

#### Romans 12:9-21

##### The Bible says:

- hate evil (vs. 9)
- do good (vs. 9)
- be zealous in serving (vs. 10)
- be patient in suffering (vs. 12)
- be constant in prayer (vs. 12)
- be generous in giving (vs. 13)
- bless those who oppress you (vs. 14)
- live in harmony with everyone (vs.16)
- be humble (vs. 16)
- associate with the lowly (vs. 16)
- turn the other cheek (vs. 17)

##### The World says:

evil is relative  
do the expedient  
take care of yourself  
claim victim status  
you're too busy to pray  
you deserve more for yourself  
get even  
play to win  
you're number one  
be a climber  
seek revenge

- do good even to your enemies. (vs. 19) hate your enemies

We can live the Biblical way only when our life is hidden in Christ and his cross. Jesus calls you to a new life. It is a life focused on trusting in God instead of fearing for your life. It is life focused on giving instead of grasping, of helping instead of hiding. Jesus calls on you to give up your natural propensity for taking care of self and to care for others. Jesus calls you to lose your life for His sake...to commit yourself to the gospel above all attempts to replace it with a politically correct agenda of the world. This means to give yourself over to loving as Jesus loved, serving as Jesus served. In a strange twist of logic this turns out to be the secret to life. True life is found when you live under the shadow of the cross and let that cross inform and direct your life. It runs counter to your natural tendencies but it leads to life that will last forever.

***24 " Jesus told his disciples, If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*** Even so, Lord Jesus, lead your people in the way of the cross. AMEN