

Homily Proper 17A  
S. Stephen's, Providence  
August 30, 2020

*"Let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."*

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, if you were here or listening online last week,

you'll recall that our Gospel reading was centered around Peter's confession of Jesus

as the Christ and Son of the Living God.

I also pointed out that perhaps it didn't take much for Peter to blurt it out,

as he was always saying and doing impulsive things.

We pick up today right where we left off,

and Jesus is now foretelling his death and resurrection.

Now understandably this would cause some pain and confusion,

particularly since the disciples have just been told that Jesus is in fact the Messiah.

This is supposed to be a ticket to power and glory,

and the long-awaited restoration of Israel and its independence from foreign powers:

so it is no surprise, then, that Peter took Jesus and began to rebuke him, saying,

"God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you."

Well, this doesn't sit well with Jesus – neither being told what to do,  
nor Peter apparently entirely missing the point of everything he's taught him.

This leads to that stinging rebuke from Jesus:

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.”

Ouch. Satan? Well, you've made your point Jesus.

Except that Jesus hasn't really made his point yet.

He really needs to get his message across to Peter,  
and uses even stronger language and bolder imagery.

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Now, I don't know about you,

but if I wanted to persuade or convince someone to follow me –

or if I wanted to convince someone outside the life of faith

that they should consider following Jesus,

these are probably not the words I would immediately lead with.

It doesn't sound enticing.

It's not the obvious recipe for success.

It is not the kind of mission statement one would expect for church growth.

And yet for two thousand years,

these words have been just that:

arresting, compelling, and life changing.

What is it about the invitation to self-denial and perhaps even hardship

that makes disciples?

Before we explore that,

let me first say what this invitation to costly sacrifice is not.

How many times when discussing a difficult life situation of a friend or neighbor

have we heard someone say,

“Well, I guess it’s her cross to bear,” or “We all have our cross to bear?”

Or in our own lives, when confronted by a difficult relationship,

or a terrible situation in life,

have thought to ourselves “I guess this is my cross to bear?”

Jesus’s invitation to take up the cross and follow him

is not an endorsement of pain and suffering and sadness for their own sake:

Any situation in which we find ourselves exploited, abused, or hurt

is contrary to the will of God for all of his children.

So the invitation to take up the cross is not an endorsement or condoning

of suffering and hardship to simply be endured wherever we encounter them.

Rather, the invitation to follow Jesus and to take up our cross

is to embrace his way of self-offering for others:

it is a call to reject the world's standards or definitions of glory and success.

It is to lead a life that in its orientation towards God and others,

is broken open in such a way that it yields more life, more love, more light.

So often,

we are conditioned to think that if we give something away we won't get it back,

or that if we give of ourselves, it involves losing something.

What Jesus is trying to get Peter to see is the long view – the bigger picture –

and he uses the language of paradox.

What appears to be loss is actually gain.

His death won't be the end, but just the beginning.

By his death, eternal life for all of God's children will be won,

and the powers of sin and death defeated once and for all.

Likewise,

you and I are called to think beyond the immediate moment,

and to consider how our ways of living can be transformed into lives

that both glorify and point to God,  
and give of our time and our love and our talent in order to reach others –  
those around us in need of God's love.

That's all of us, by the way.

We all benefit from one another when we give of ourselves,  
and let our lives point toward the one who calls us to follow him.

When we do, our light shines more brightly,  
and collectively it shines more and more,  
until it becomes a light on a hill – a beacon for all those around who might see it.

Perhaps S. Stephen's is being called to be a bright beacon on College Hill,  
are we not?

Now at this point, you might be thinking to your selves,

"Well this all sounds well and good, Father, but what does it actually mean?"

What does this invitation to follow Jesus and take up our cross look like  
in our day to day living?

Well, as it turns out,

our epistle reading from Paul's letter to the Romans this morning  
provides us with some examples.

For you see, the invitation to follow Jesus and take up the cross

isn't a summons to accomplish a gargantuan task that is nearly impossible:  
rather, it begins with the small things, and how we go about our daily living,  
and how we interact with one another.

And so Paul has quite a list about what that looks like:

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; <sup>[a]</sup> never be conceited. <sup>17</sup> Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all."

To live by these standards and practices,

is to have one's soul well ordered.

And when the soul is well ordered, the Christian can face whatever comes their way – good or bad.

Very few of us will be called upon to offer our lives the way in which Jesus did,  
and in the ways of the martyrs we celebrate.

But it is the daily living out of these qualities Paul lists –  
the orientation of one's self towards God and others –  
of having a well-ordered soul,

and of being in solidarity with our brothers and sisters,  
particularly when they are oppressed,  
that have positioned the saints of the past with the confidence,  
courage, and faith required of them,  
whatever came their way –  
and ultimately, when they had to forfeit the world, but gain their souls.  
Just take for example two martyrs we've remembered earlier this month (Aug14):  
one was Maximilian Kolbe,  
a Polish priest who perished in the Holocaust when he offered his own life  
in place of another man's in the camp who had a wife and children.  
The other was Jonathan Myrick Daniels,  
a white civil rights activist who stepped in front of a shot gun  
aimed at a young black girl, Ruby Sales.  
Jonathan's death enabled her to live – and she herself became a priest.  
His story, and Maximilian Kolbe's, have inspired countless others.  
These are just two among thousands and thousands of stories like this  
over the course of the centuries of Christian witness and faith.  
And why have men and women all over the world and across the centuries  
done these things?

Because they have known the great and compelling truth of these words,  
spoken by our Lord.

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?”

Like Saint Francis, they have understood the paradox  
that it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

As I said before,

Jesus’s words about giving away instead of saving up,  
of self-denial and taking up the cross to follow him  
don’t exactly sound like the best way to attract followers;  
they don’t fit in with the world’s definition of success;  
nor are they the invitation to a happy or care-free life:  
but they do promise us that we will discover something worth more than life  
itself.

And that, my friends, is a promise worthy of all our faithfulness. Amen.



Dear brothers and sisters,

This Sunday we encounter one of my favorite collects in the Prayer Book, which entreats God to “graft in our hearts the love of thy Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works.” As if to anticipate the questions, “Well, what exactly is true religion? And what are examples of the fruits of good works?” the portion from Paul’s letter to the Romans that we will hear on Sunday provides us with a long list of examples. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.” And that’s only the beginning of it!

Our Gospel reading picks up where it left off last week, and we will encounter an impulsive Peter being admonished by Jesus with the infamous rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus then proceeds to remind them that the Christian life will be one of self-denial and forgoing the usual definitions of worldly success and power. The Gospel shows us that real power and true glory look very different from what we are often told they look like, and that we are to lead lives that more closely resemble in word and deed the actions and postures listed by St. Paul above.

I pray that we may always have the grace to take a step back and examine our lives, our actions, and our priorities, hold them up to the light of the Gospel, and consider whether our thoughts and deeds are in all honesty as closely aligned with the values of the Kingdom of God as they could be. Jesus’s words about self-denial and taking up the cross to follow him don’t exactly sound like an invitation to a happy or care-free life – but they do promise us that we will discover something worth more than life itself. And that, my friends, is a promise worthy of all our faithfulness.

Fr. Benjamin