

The way of the cross is the way of life

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, September 16, 2018

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19, Year B)

(Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38)

*Mark 8:27-38: Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

*Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

*He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

This weekend, people in the Carolinas are weathering a huge storm. The forecast of Florence pushed millions west, away from the coast. Rain and storm surge are flooding the area and residents there are going through a rough time of hardship. As they struggle to find safety and deal with the storm, they are served by others who are trained for this kind of hardship. So many teams of planners, first responders and National Guard soldiers didn't go west this week, but instead headed east, into the storm.

We admire these courageous people who give of themselves to serve others. In fact, we are inspired by the discipline that they take on in order to sacrifice themselves in this way. We see this in athletes, soldiers, and even physicians. You would think that the promise of grueling hard work, long hours and dangerous conditions would scare people away, but instead, this life of discipline seems inspiring. They know that this path of courage and discipline and hardship is the path of honor and of life.

As Christians, we are called to a similar path. We aren't always asked to endure weeks of boot camp or endless hours of training and pressure. And yet, like Peter, we often balk at the cost of following Jesus. We admire those who tackle huge challenges as athletes and soldiers and first responders. But in our own lives, as spiritual athletes and soldiers of the cross, we sometimes have trouble just getting up on Sunday mornings.

What would it be like to embrace the honor and strength and courage of the Christian life? What would it be like to pursue growth in the Christian life with the same passion as new soldiers, or the same self-giving as first responders?

Early in his ministry, Jesus gave his disciples a vision of the Kingdom of God, healing people and delivered them from evil, preaching God's grace, calling them to repentance and giving them forgiveness and reconciliation. He asked his disciples what people were saying about him. Then he asked them what they thought. Peter answers for the others when he says "You are the

Messiah!” They must have been so hopeful at that moment. They had hoped for someone who would kick out the Romans and lead the Jews to power again.

But now that they have claimed Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus then tells them where he is going, and what it will take to follow him. Instead of military victory over the Romans, Jesus is headed to suffering, rejection and death, and then to rise again. Peter doesn’t want to hear it, so Jesus tells him and the others that Peter has his mind on human things, not divine things. Jesus tells his disciples that following him will demand their best and ask for their sacrifice. They will have to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. For, Jesus says, “those who want to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Jesus tells his disciples that the path of the cross is the path of life. With courage and commitment, we too can embrace this path of life that Jesus offers.

Let me share with you some stories of individuals who have followed in this way. You may have heard these before, but they bear repeating. I know a man named John from one of the churches I served in Pennsylvania. John wasn’t the sort of man to stand out in a crowd. He wasn’t much of a self-promoter. In fact, others in his career had stepped over him on their way up the ladder, and he eventually shifted careers, with a great deal of loss in the process.

John was a member of our church, and he became the sort of person who was always there. He was a steady presence and a reliable figure in ministry. Other men found that they could always count on him. Over time, that trust led men to ask him to lead our men’s ministry. And as leaders in the church came to know him and watch him operate, they asked him to run for vestry. Then he became the treasurer. Then he became the Senior Warden.

I’m not trying to suggest that these different roles are like rungs on a ladder to success (it doesn’t work that way), but you wouldn’t expect to find a humble man like John in such a prominent leadership role in the largest church in the diocese. And yet he was there. Not because of any slick style or big personality. Rather through his humility and obedience to God, John provided trustworthy service that was eventually recognized by others, and empowered for wider service. Humility is not the world’s idea of a path to leadership. But Jesus makes humility the path to honor.

Some of you know the story of a young pastor who was sent by his denomination to close a small struggling church in the center of the worst part of town. They had no money, they had no people, they had no confidence, and the world around them was falling apart. One Sunday, a prostitute came in to the church, and Pastor Bruce welcomed her. She was tired and she wanted to get out of the life she was living, and Bruce offered her something of God’s grace. The next week she brought friends and others who were trapped in a world of drugs and alcohol and crime. In a few weeks, the church was filled with people seeking God’s grace and a way out of the path of death.

Bruce and his family saw the call of God clearly, though it would mean danger and loss of privilege. Instead of closing that church, Bruce and his family moved into that troubled

neighborhood to serve God as best they could. This was a challenging ministry, establishing a beachhead deep inside enemy territory. But today, by their diligence and God's grace, Bruce Deel still presides over a ministry called City of Refuge, making a difference in the lives of hundreds of people in Atlanta—the last, the lost and the least in our world. He and his family sacrificed every day, but the path of Christian sacrifice is the path to God's abundance for those who follow Jesus and for the world around them. Jesus makes humility the path to honor. Jesus makes sacrifice the path to abundance.

We have heard other stories of heroic Christian service. We know the story of Martin Luther King Jr and his sacrifice of peace and life for God's justice. Many of you have heard the story of Maximillian Kolbe, a Catholic priest who volunteered his life in a Nazi prison camp so that another prisoner could live. For King and for Kolbe, Jesus made the path of self-giving the path of life. They are heroes to us, and yet their gifts came from the same commitment that Jesus asks of me and of you. Their heroism came from the same training that led my friend John to his humble and faithful service. They were formed by the same Christian life to which you and I are called.

Kolbe and King and Bruce Deel and my friend John all came from the boot camp of self-denial. They were formed by the daily exercise of prayer. They trained in long hours of forgiveness and humility. They were taught in the regular study of Holy Scripture. They drilled regularly in the practice of generosity and service. They served not only for love of country, but for love of Jesus who first loved them.

My friends, the noble and heroic Christian life is not just for the few. The courageous calling of discipleship is not something just for stories. Jesus calls *you* to this path of life. Jesus invites *you* to share in the honor and abundance and fulfillment found on Jesus' path of humility, sacrifice and self-giving.

Who do you say that Jesus is? Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus gave himself for you because of his deep love for you. And Jesus calls you to the new and abundant life that he has to offer. Embrace that call of God. With the strength and courage of soldiers, pursue the Christian disciplines of prayer and study. With the self-giving of first responders, pour out yourselves in generosity and service. For we do not follow stories of heroes. We follow the one who loved us first, who gave his life for us, who set us free from sin and death, who empowers us with the Holy Spirit to take on this new life and share it with others.

In Jesus, our humility is the path of honor. In Jesus, our sacrifice and self-giving is the path of abundance. Jesus invites us on the way of the cross because it is the way of the resurrection and new life in him. Embrace with courage the new life that Jesus gives you, and when the storm comes, share that new life with others.