



"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

February 25, 2018

Second Sunday in Lent

Mark 8:31-38; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Going for the ~~Gold~~ Cross

The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

I expect we've taken up the remote a bit recently to go to the Olympics. People from all over the world spinning, jumping, sledding, twirling, curling. Even coming from places where the winter Olympic record one might expect is how fast Frosty and Olaf the snowmen can melt! I've done just enough skiing and skating to fully appreciate, even marvel at how they stay up on those things and never fall! It's moving when people persevere through adversity, or an underdog rises to the occasion in the time of their life, going for gold. Many athletes sacrifice greatly—bodily, financially, relationally—to reach heights of success. In spirit and physical accomplishment, in the Olympics we glimpse the best human life can be.

I've enjoyed watching German and Canadian bobsled teams tie for gold, then jump and hug each other with joy. And everyone celebrating the Nigerians making it down the track. And when the Tongan cross-country skier waited for the Mexican to finish last after virtually everyone else had left. When the victorious Japanese skater consoled the sobbing South Korean who finished second and they skated together, despite bitter centuries-old conflict and competitive rivalry between their nations. And it's been interesting to process triumphal victory and the agony of defeat, in this week when Jesus says, "take up your cross and follow me."

In some ways, friends, the cross is the antithesis of the Olympic medal platform. And that's where we're going today. Still, as we start this event together, know that I don't believe all competitive ways of the world are inherently bad. I confess to

times when I played every game of soccer or tennis, ultimate frisbee or basketball, even in the church league, like it was a gold medal final! I've benefited from some healthy competition in life, like seminary Hebrew class with my study partner, academic contender, and ping-pong opponent. A little Olympic-sized or ordinary competitive fire can help our journey to the cross. Going to the cross takes commitment, dedication, determination, sacrifice like going for the gold.

But friends, Jesus on the cross is more than a great Olympic miracle moment times infinity. It's about everyday life—yours and mine. The way to the cross is more than bucking up and getting through misfortune. As with any moment, what gives meaning to the cross is what comes before and what happens after. Taking up the cross depends on intention. Persevering through adversity for a purpose greater than our own success. Willing to sacrifice, to expend the last ounce of effort, any cost, all we have, precisely not for personal gain and glory, rather for the good of someone else and the glory of God's grace in the world.

Intention. You see, long before Jesus gets to the final destination on a hill, for him the cross is an orientation of the heart. It's about choices made despite likely consequences of suffering and sacrifice. Some consequences we might logically expect, and some ethical trials we couldn't possibly imagine, yet we all know will come, if we're honest with ourselves and about our world. Intention frames how we face experiences. Intention grows into determination.

Jesus teaches his close friends where this Way, Truth, and Life in Holy Love will probably lead. Surely, they'd seen others crucified beside the road—as many as 2,000 Galileans at once when Jesus was a boy.¹ Peter just proclaimed Jesus the Messiah. Now he thinks Jesus crashed an Olympic landing or skied way off course. Just “shut up and heal or work miracles,” Peter tells Jesus. You see, Peter does the logic. He fears what it all means for him. If the man and the way to which he's

given his life is gone, he just might be a goner too. That's not success or victory he envisions—revolution and liberation from Rome. That's not the glory he seeks. Emotionally, imaginatively, motivationally Peter can't conceive the promise in death and resurrection. That's not how the world works. Not the world of Hollywood superheroes, anyway, or video-games or big-time sports, or too often Capitol Hill and the campaign trail, a world of me-me-me.

Peter urges Jesus to fudge his convictions for the sake of his own salvation. No, Jesus says, I live for the sake of others, for the salvation of the world. Jesus responds to his surprising tempter, adversary, deceiver (that's literally what "the Satan" means). Jesus says get behind me, that is get in line. Put your protests aside and get in step with me. Don't block my way, follow wherever it may lead. Jesus lays out the course ahead. If you want to walk with me, you have to take up the cross too. That choice defines discipleship. We'll face resistance and persecution for Divine purposes, Jesus warns. We'll need persistence through sacrifice, not avoidance.

They're external threats. And you know, stumbling blocks and adversaries we face when following Christ can be internal thoughts as well. Fear, doubt, self-centeredness, insecurity, anger, greed, addiction, conflict, despair at injustices beyond our control or job uncertainty. So much that can sap hope and courage. So much that can stop faithful people like ancient Jews and me and you from going where Jesus leads, and doing what we believe God calls us to, standing beside others in the midst of struggle. Internal temptations to substitute love of power for the power of love; selfish pursuits for sacrificial service; real or perceived security for compromising our commitment and convictions,

Friends, I read the Bible. I know what's in the news. I listen to you. And I believe amid our deepest hurts, the greatest hope for our world, the heart of our living faith is sacrificial love. Again, we're not just talking rough patches and hard times that

come for all of us. And “bearing the cross” should never justify abuse or enable exploitation. It’s not helpful for me to imagine God wanted and intended Jesus to suffer on the cross. And I don’t believe God wants or intends and puts that upon us, either. Rather Jesus goes to the cross because people suffer and he chooses to be with them in it, to serve them through it ... and he pays the price. Our way to the cross begins with the promise and comfort that God is with us everywhere, through everything. And because we receive that gift greater than all sin and evil, we’re filled with courage to pursue Jesus’ way of grace and peace in a broken and fearful world. You see, friends, taking up the cross is not passive life with no power. Taking up the cross is inspired choice. It’s a claim of power. It’s deliberate action. It’s determined motivation to live in a certain way whatever occurred, and come what may! It often means giving up rights and just rewards in responsibility for others. The way to the cross is sacrifice for a purpose, trusting the promise of resurrection.

Paul says this vision for life can seem like foolishness. I expect he was concerned about the Corinthians forgetfulness. That’s why he writes to them. After he left, they seemed tempted to follow other people of faith and paths of wisdom.

We can get forgetful, too. Ann Ross and Chrissy and Kathleen and I were talking about pastoral concerns this week. Somehow we got around to aging and forgetfulness one of them noted that a child recently observed it begins at age 8! Ann clarified, that as there’s only so much room in the brain. After a while things start falling out to make a place for the next piece. And when we get old and forgetful, it’s just that we’re filled with so much wisdom!

Paul seems concerned the Corinthians have forgotten, filled their minds with other things. And so, the cross can seem like foolishness ... when we’re perishing. When in our own lives, or people we love so often we see people doing anything to get the

job, to win the money, to work social connections, to achieve security ... yet losing our soul. Perishing. That's what Paul means. See through deceptive illusions to what is real life full of true joy more than momentary happiness; in abiding trust more than passing knowledge or control; with deep centered peace more than mere physical safety. This is God's Wisdom Jesus embodied: In losing we gain. In giving we receive. In sacrificing we are sustained. In death we are raised to new life.

In Jesus Christ, God tries to take the best loving impulses in our hearts and minds, then broaden our horizons, definitions, and imagination of "winning success." God moves us from narrow self-interest to life in community. God transforms our fears, judgment, and competition into compassion. God inspires us from complacency and complicity into service, even sacrifice for the good of others.

This Divine Foolishness is greater than human wisdom, Paul urges. Such a committed relationship with God nurtures true peace and joy in us far beyond any illusion of life as perfect bliss. And it's not just some spiritual peace, refreshment, high joy. It has a real impact in society. When I share with you our personal troubles and conflicts. When I reflect with you about issues of our world—moral questions, the Great Recession and financial policies, gun violence and poverty. Inevitably selfishness takes life. Sacrificial service raises us to new life. Friends, I trust that with this orientation, when we take up the cross, we will share the promise and power of resurrection in community together—real practical outcomes in which life is better, far more abundant for all, including symbiotically each of us.

"The cross is laid on every Christian," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not as a terrible end, but "at the beginning of our communion with Christ."ⁱⁱ He'd just written about costly grace we encounter in following Christ. He was the Lindsey Vonn or Mikaela Shiffrin of theology, at Union Seminary in New York, the Olympic venue of its day among great leaders of faith. His office might as well have been a medal platform.

He knew well what a good life it would be. And he had no illusions about threats and dangers awaiting him at home. He'd spoke out since Hitler's first days as Chancellor. The Nazis took over the church. They shut down his underground seminary.

Bonhoeffer could have served well here in the States. Inspiring many and publicizing events in Germany. And Hitler would not have executed him by hanging in a concentration camp. But the moment he arrived here in the summer of 1939, his heart was unsettled, regretful. I wish I could have been with him in that moment—maybe not unlike many we face. His friends pressured him to stay—foolishness to go back. Listen to the wisdom he wrote to Reinhold Neibuhr. “I’ve come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life after the war, if I do not share the trials of this time.”ⁱⁱⁱ Bonhoeffer returned on the last ship across the Atlantic. And so began or really continued his communion with Christ, under the yoke and burden of the cross.

In one of my favorite hymns, I imagine Washington Gladden expresses what's in Bonhoeffer's heart, and ours at our best. Gladden preached in years after the Civil War. He took up the cause of issues in his time—like laborers who suffered and corrupt politicians and liberal distortions of Christian faith. Maybe he chose to call Jesus “master” precisely against slavery in much the same way Germans against the Nazis said, “Jesus is my Fuhrer,” not Hitler. In any case, “master” really means teacher from whom we learn, whom we follow as we try to make our way through the world.

Let us walk with thee, O Jesus Christ, in lowly paths of service free. Bearing the strain of toil, not just difficulties and misfortune for our own gain alone, rather as we

share the fret of care for all who suffer and struggle. Help us speak not arrogant arguments or insensitive humor. Rather clear compassionate words of love to win among others courage more than accolades, generosity more than greed, caring hearts more than quarreling spats, to guide us all together in the way home to God's peace. Teach us patience and perseverance, even when we face daunting days and trying times and caustic conflict in response to our living faith. When we take up the cross of your loving purposes, O Christ, help us be willing to sacrifice our position, our privilege, our resources, our pleasure for the good abundant life of others ... trusting that your strong grace with triumph over all that is wrong.

We take up the cross, as Jesus did. We follow that way fully aware of where it may lead. Most of the time for us, it won't be high stakes and extreme circumstances. It's more our ordinary routines and relationships, with our beloved or work colleagues or strangers on the street. In responsibility for all in creation beyond my rights and pleasures alone. In decisions and actions that may challenge and disagree yet never demean. In God's grace, that makes all the Olympic-size difference.

Dear friends, as we take up the cross it's not about an individual legacy in celebrated memory like the greatest gold medal accomplishments. Our legacy is the life we give to others. Life in a great symbiosis of Sacred Grace which we receive, and which continues to radiate and renew and resurrect others in community, and across miles and millennia.

We take up the cross beginning with those most near and dear to us—that's what being a beloved partner or parent is all about. Sitting with a newborn at midnight, or grown into adults but never out of need. Standing with a beloved who's taken a blow, and now it's hard to know what's coming next—in all the vulnerability and uncertainty.

We take up the cross and maybe that means sacrificing your job to care for someone else. Maybe that means staying in your job even though you hate it, because it is the way you care for someone else. Maybe that means in your job, standing up for others, doing what's right, even though you might lose yours.

We take up the cross even time we tutor, and sort food, and serve a meal, and build a home and volunteer in all the ways we do in our city. We lift high the cross when we remember teachers and students at Margery Stoneman Douglas school who held open doors and more determination to rally others than save themselves. When we remember Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King Jr, Grandma Esther and Mr. Smith who inspired us and touched us deeply in a special way long ago.

We lift high the cross when we take up the causes of God's vision for all of life abiding in a sanctuary of grace and peace. And we're willing to pay the cost in time and effort, in thought and emotion, in money and email messages, in all our ways of living faith.

Take that perseverance through adversity, that attitude of generosity, that loving orientation and intention far beyond medal platforms into ordinary life. Take up your cross and walk with me, Jesus said.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ W. Hulitt Gloer, "Homiletical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 73.

ⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan Company 1949), 79.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie, p. 736 quoted in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer