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Proper 7C (BCP): Luke 9:18-24
June 24, 2007
St. Anne's Church, Annapolis, MD
Taking up our Cross

When I lived in Chicago, I met a woman who did an amazing thing. She built and ran a meal program that feeds hundreds of people every day in a poor area on the west side of the city. She feeds people who otherwise fall through the cracks, who can't make ends meet, whose addictions, disabilities, and poverty wring them out, leaving them just unable to feed themselves. Her ability to mobilize volunteers could make her the leader of a huge agency. Her ability to stretch resources could gain her a post in some governor's cabinet. Her ability to organize an operation that works efficiently could make her a great CEO. Instead, she works in relative anonymity. Rather than socializing with the powerful and respectable in society, she spends her time with derelicts, drunks, and the poor, all of whom she calls her "family." When asked how she is able to keep doing her work, she replies, "When you have a strange vocation, it helps to have a strange family."

I will not forget that.

I won't forget that because you and I, we, are members of a strange family with a strange vocation. Today we hear about our strange vocation in these words of our gospel lesson: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses daily and follow me." Take up our crosses daily and follow. This is part of our vocation, our calling. By "calling" I mean that thing you cannot not do, that thing that meets a need inside of you and in the world, that way of offering yourself that you just have to attend to, because something keeps reminding you of it, like a tugging, or pushing or nagging. In every one of our gospels Jesus talks about taking up our cross, losing ourselves to find ourselves. It's so central to what it means to be followers of Christ, that all this repetition just may sound like such a nagging.

What is it, to take up our cross daily? That last word is an important word: daily. In only Luke's telling of it does Jesus include the word "daily," as if for special emphasis. So Jesus is not talking only to Christians facing imminent martyrdom or death. No, Jesus is talking to people who face the challenge of being Christians in their day-to-day lives, in a world that finds Christians either irrelevant or offensive. This means Jesus is talking to us.

We live in a world that increasingly doesn't recognize, let alone know how to interpret many of the basic signs and symbols of Christianity. I experienced this reality in a simple but startling way in the parish I served in Milwaukee. We had a program for children in our surrounding neighborhood and several children came into our worship space for the first time. A number of them, after looking around, wanted to know what all the "t's" were for. T's? They meant the crosses.

The good news for us in all this is we do have the opportunity to look afresh at a symbol so central as the cross and take to heart what Jesus really means.

What is our cross that we take up daily? That depends on you and your circumstances. But it is not the suffering that can happen to any human being just by being human. It is not the suffering that comes from growing old or sick. It is not cancer, a physical challenge or the common cold. How you bear these things may be your cross, what you do with them, through them, or in spite of them may be your cross. These may affect your cross, but they are not your cross, because you can't take these up freely, like Christ went to the cross freely. Freedom is important in this. Remember our family story begins in a garden where God would rather risk disastrous consequence, including God's own suffering and heartache, rather than take away our freedom.

Your cross is what you do, who you are, in your daily life that chooses good over evil, chooses God before yourself, chooses the way of Christ over business as usual. It is called a cross because when you do this, it will hurt. It will hurt because a confrontation between you and the world means pain.

You know this. You know it can be difficult to live the life you're called to as a follower of Christ in your office, in your neighborhood, maybe even in your home. You know that being faithful to the call to follow Christ will cost you something.

It will hurt because we gather here and either God is present with us, or we are pathetic fools, and many people are quite sure we are pathetic fools. Taking up your cross means risking that they are wrong, and living like you're betting your life on it.

It will hurt because it means going against the prevailing notion that you really can have it all, and instead knowing that the All, the Alpha and Omega, has you, and that God may grasp you and shake things up for you and empty you before filling you.

It will hurt because Jesus tells us we must take up our cross, not as part of a nine-step plan for spiritual success, but to follow.

This is a strange vocation.

But, we can't say we weren't warned. We should have known this was coming by the way we get into this strange family, where we have very little choice in choosing our relatives, and, in fact, where ties of water are thicker than blood.

When you join a gym, you get a membership card and a tour of the place. When you join this family, they hand you over to someone who dumps water on you, says your name, and traces the lines of a cross on your forehead, then sets you loose to take up your own cross in your own way. You are let loose, but not let alone. In baptism, people promise to help you grow and discover the ways you will take up your cross, the ways you will show that the cross you carry is far more than some lines once traced on your forehead. Your life will involve some pain because of that cross.

It will hurt because your baptism means living as St. Paul describes in our reading from Galatians.

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This means giving up privileges some would say are yours because of your race, your social standing, or your gender. This means giving up the idea that your power, your money, your address can save you, and admitting that only God can do that. This means standing with people who are different from you and saying by word and action that they are our family. Or, maybe better, there is no them: just family. If you do this, it will hurt. It will feel like a cross sometimes too heavy to take up. Some days you will want to leave this cross at home, pretend you were never splashed with the water of baptism, never had those lines traced on your forehead in the shape of a cross.

If you are having mixed feelings about all this, that’s fine. Because in those moments where you follow, when you choose to take up your cross, you will probably have mixed feelings then too. Besides the pain, you will probably feel indescribable joy and wonder.

It is possible to live out our strange vocation in our strange family. I know it’s possible because I’ve seen it. Maybe you have too.

Fred Craddock tells of seeing it – that distinctive way of coming together as a strange family with a strange vocation, of a community made up of people taking up their own crosses to follow. He saw it when how new members were welcomed into a small mission church he was serving in Appalachia. At sundown on a day in spring, the congregation would baptize new members in the shallows of a nearby lake. The small congregation would gather around a fire and sing hymns, while Craddock and the candidates for baptism would wade out into the water. After the new members were baptized and changed into dry clothing they would join the rest of the congregation around the fire to warm themselves. Once everyone was together, the custom was for a parishioner named Glen to introduce the new folks and share what they did and where they lived. Glen would then slowly work his way around the circle. Every member of the congregation would give his or her name and say something like: “My name is Mary, if you ever need somebody to do washing and ironing, let me know.” “My name is John, if you ever need somebody to chop wood, let me know.” “My name is Alice, if you ever need anybody to baby sit.” “My name is Joe, if you ever need a car to go into town.”

Once everyone was finished they would eat a huge meal and soon a banjo or a fiddle would be brought and a square dance would begin. When darkness had fallen and a chill was in the air, Percy Miller, in his bibbed overalls, would eventually stand up and say it was time to go. After everyone was gone, Percy would stay behind and kick sand over the dying fire.

Craddock says that after his first experience of welcoming new members, he noticed Percy standing behind the dying fire. Percy looked up at him and said, “Craddock, folks don’t get any closer than this.”

“In that community,” observes Craddock, “they have a name for that kind of experience. I’ve heard it in other communities too. In that community, their name for that is church. They call that church.”

May we know strength, power and joy in taking up our crosses daily to follow Jesus.

Amen.