

Pentecost 13A, September 3, 2017. Labor Day Weekend. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim WA. Jeremiah 15:15-21, Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.<sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."<sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.<sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.<sup>26</sup> For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?<sup>27</sup> "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.<sup>28</sup> Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

"Well, I guess it's just my cross to bear," said the woman whose spouse was diagnosed with cancer, said the mother whose son started taking drugs, said the dad whose job was eliminated, said the mother who lives with her school kids in a tent in the woods, said the teacher whose class size was too large.

Nonsense. The cross Jesus is talking about is one that WE pick up, that we choose, and one that benefits others. No one can impose a cross upon another. No one can tell another how she or he should serve God. No one can tell another he or she must "bear the cross" of staying in an abusive relationship.

Jesus prefaced the famous saying, with "if any WANT to become my followers." He didn't force the cross on anyone.

We are told that Constantine, the first Christian Emperor of Rome, back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when he was a Roman general, forced all his soldiers to mark the sign of Christ (chi-rho in Greek) on their shields in battle.

When Paul Rajashekar was born, his parents dedicated him to the Lutheran pastorate. As a young child, the church members addressed him as Pastor. He was slated to go to seminary. But he wanted to study economics and planned college accordingly! His parents were devastated, but for his summer work just before college, they apprenticed him to a missionary who had spent 20 years trying to convert Muslims to Christianity. The missionary was painfully unsuccessful, but his faithfulness impressed Paul. Eventually

Paul did attend seminary and became a pastor, then a seminary professor, one of mine, and administrator. He took up that particular cross not because his parents forced it on him, but because the Holy Spirit worked through that faithful missionary. That's how it works for us as well.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is working with his disciples, trying to prepare them for his suffering and death. They don't want to hear this. None of us would. No one wants to look at the pictures of people wading away from ruined homes through filthy water. No one wants to hear how many children started school this week without homes. 77 in Sequim alone.

So you can't be too hard on Peter. He didn't want his beloved Jesus to suffer. Last week we heard the story of how Jesus called Peter's faith the rock on which he would found the church. A month ago we heard the story of Peter's faith enabling him to walk on water. This week we hear Jesus call him a great tempter and tell him to get out of his face. We know later that Peter will swear to follow Jesus to the death, but then will deny him three times out of fear. And we know that Jesus will call Peter to "feed his sheep" during a post-Easter fish-fry and that Peter will eventually preach boldly in Jerusalem and head the early church there. He is so very real. So very much like us. Inspired one day and discouraged and fearful the next. Bold one day and timid the next. Knowing the risen Christ made the difference for Peter.

As the Gospel-writers remember it, Jesus remained consistently strong, consistent in healing, speaking truth to power, teaching and forgiving. And consistent in calling any who WANTED to become his followers to pick up their crosses and follow. He wouldn't allow even his friend Peter to tempt him from the things that he stood for, the actions that would eventually lead to the cross.

So, if we WANT to follow Jesus, we are invited to pick up a cross and follow. No one will force it upon us. Some people here at church think we have too many requests for help here; others think it's great that we have so many forms of outreach available: the free medical clinic, the garage sale and bazaar that benefit many programs in our community, the requests from our church World Hunger Efforts and now Disaster Relief programs for hurricane victims, the hopes for a concrete way to shelter homeless families, the practical "God's Work Our Hands" event, the food bank, the school and baby kits, the quilts ... and now specific relief items for Texas. There seems to be no end. But no one will force you to participate. On the other hand, how wonderful to have so many choices. I invite you to choose one and let your check-writing hand go wild and your best efforts tackle the issues!

This week over a dozen of our ELCA partner churches in Texas were flooded, some with over 3 feet of water. Others were dry enough to open their doors to people looking for shelter. St. Paul Lutheran Church in La Grange, Texas, sheltered two nursing homes that evacuated. Others took in people from their communities – members or not. Medical personnel and pastors are caring for people this very moment who are temporarily housed in the Brown convention center in Houston and elsewhere.

I wonder if we would house a Sequim family -- now living in a tent or in their van -- in one of our Sunday School rooms and buy them a Y membership for showering and recreation? Provide them child care? Their needs are at least as great as those of the flood victims.

Cyprian, third-century martyr, sounds like many of us in this letter to his friend Donatus. “This is a cheerful world as I see it from my garden under the shadows of the vines. But if I were to ascend some high mountain” – we might say if I were to turn on the TV or open the newspaper – “and look over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see: brigands on the highways, pirates on the sea, armies fighting, cities burning; in the amphitheaters men murdered to please the applauding crowds; selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair under all roofs. It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians – and I am one of them.”

St. Paul, in the letter to the Romans which we heard this morning, asks his readers to be “patient in suffering”, rejoice in hope, persevere in prayer.

Paul was talking to people who might be arrested or executed for their faith. His words are true for us as well, who are comfortable and well-fed. Our suffering is minimal in comparison. But we choose to suffer in caring about the homeless children of our schools, the flooded-out or burned-out people, the 44% of children in Washington state who receive free or reduced-price school lunches because their families are so poor, many from the Olympic Peninsula.

We persevere in prayer, as Paul advised, because we believe that our prayer, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,” will be answered.

Back when I was working in Philadelphia, people became excited about the mock trial team from Overbrook High School. The team credited what they called the “Philly factor” for their success. The Overbrook team members

swaggered into competitions. They were not the best dressed, their school and families were among the poorest, there were no obvious advantages, but they had ATTITUDE. They prepared thoroughly and went on to beat team after team from wealthy and private schools. "Why?" "Because we expect to win," they said.

That's how Christians overcome the suffering we encounter. We EXPECT to win. We expect the Kingdom of God. We expect Christ's mercy and wisdom and eternal life to be ours as well. We expect to find ways to shelter, feed, care for those in need.

Just like Peter, we all have our faithless, tempter, frightened sides, but we expect to overcome. By faith the kingdom of God is already beating in our hearts and Jesus' values are alive in the world. Jesus took up a real, harsh, cruel cross: out of the eternal love God has showered on our world since time began. It looked like Jesus lost his life, but he triumphed over the grave. So we do not fear losing our lives, whether we have gained power over the world as Constantine did, or whether our lives seem small. Each of us is healed and held by a love that ultimately gives us a place where all tears are wiped away, all pain ceases, and evil is overcome.

We can get busy sharing that attitude, that love, that generosity with those who have yet to realize it. We can walk alongside the mother with kids in the tent, the father who lost his job, the children who can't read, the worrying spouse, the unemployed and underemployed persons. How best to do this???

The cross we choose to pick up is the challenge to figure it out. We rejoice in the opportunities we have to live and to give generously. In Jesus' Name. Amen.