



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

February 28, 2021
The Second Sunday in Lent

Choral Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
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The cost of grace: The discovery of my true self.

Two years before the start of the Second World War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words, “*Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*”¹

Difficult and challenging words which are as important now as they were then. At the beginning of another Lent, we are hearing again the call of Jesus to follow him; to deny ourselves and to take up our cross. This season of Lent is all about discipleship and the cost of that discipleship.

The catechism of the Episcopal Church has a definition of grace within the sections on the sacramental life of the Church.

Question: What is grace?

Answer: Grace is God's favor toward us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills.

Like faith, grace is, therefore, a gift of God that is freely given but which cost a great deal. As Libby Clark, a dear departed member of our Altar Guild used to say, grace is “**God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.**”

God’s riches at Christ’s expense.

And our journey through Lent is intended to deepen our faith and to make us receptive to that costly grace that flows from God because of where Lent will lead us – the celebration of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If grace is costly, then we should respond with humility and gratitude. As we read at the beginning of John’s Gospel, “*From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*” (John 1:16) As we heard in our epistle reading today, Paul reflected on the faith of Abraham and how he was filled with grace and was utterly attuned to God’s call so much so that his name was changed from Abram to Abraham – he discovered his real self, his real calling. Similarly, Paul reminded the first Christians of Rome to contemplate the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as part of their identity.

Yet, so often, we cheapen grace by taking it for granted. Even our acts of self-denial in Lent can seem trivial and worthless; we struggle to deny ourselves the simplest of things – meat, chocolate, alcohol, coffee, candy...we have all done it, and we have all failed to keep even that mediocre discipline.

And then, as if to compound things still further, our guilt can be out of proportion with the smallness of what we have attempted to deny ourselves! I guess what I am saying is, what does it matter if I give up meat on Fridays if I carry angry feelings towards someone? What is the point of making myself miserable if I cannot make someone else happy? Could it be that when Jesus asks me to deny myself, he means something quite different?

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Last week, we heard of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. In Mark’s Gospel we are told that in this wilderness experience he was tempted by Satan and he was with the wild beasts. Matthew and Luke give us very particular temptations and, in each case, Jesus resists them and is resolutely attuned to God’s salvific work. As we ponder today’s Gospel, it is good to remember the context of this passage. Only a few verses before today’s Gospel reading, Peter makes his bold confession of Jesus – “You are the Messiah” – the *Christ*, the ‘anointed one.’ The depth of relationship between Peter, the disciples, and Jesus had moved to a new level and Jesus immediately shares with them the fact that he will suffer, be rejected, killed, and raised again on the third day. Then Mark gives us a very specific detail in the narrative, ‘he said this quite *openly*’ which is then contrasted with Peter taking Jesus aside, presumably privately, during which Peter begins to rebuke Jesus. Peter may have been trying to do this quietly, perhaps because he felt he had a special relationship with Jesus now that he had confessed him as Messiah, but Mark tells us that Jesus looked back at the disciples and, in turn, rebuked Peter with the very same words that Matthew and Luke use at the temptations: *“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

Now that we know the context of this passage, we begin to see how important is this next teaching of the Lord, *“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.”*

Sadly, many months later, Peter and those same disciples would abandon their Lord in the garden of Gethsemane. And, later that night, perhaps drawn by guilt or fear, or perhaps love, Peter would find himself in the courtyard of the High Priest’s House only to find that he was unable to deny himself. Instead, he denied the very person he had confessed as Lord and Savior. Luke put this most poignantly, *“about an hour later still another kept insisting, ‘Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about!’ At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.” (Luke 22:59-62)*

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Jesus told his disciples that they needed to deny themselves. The Greek word is exactly the same as that used for Peter’s denial of Jesus. It is a very strong word and I think it says something about the personal relationship that God wants to have with you and with me. Denying oneself is not about giving things up – it is nothing to do with giving up candy in Lent! Rather, it is about allowing ourselves to become more like Christ rather than the person we think we want to be and, at the same time, recognizing Jesus for who he really is. To put it another way, Peter took Jesus aside privately and dared tell him the kind of Messiah he wanted him to be for which he received a rebuke. After that rebuke, Jesus uses that strong word denial – the same word associated with Peter’s denial of him after his arrest. I think that the call of Jesus to deny oneself is more about actively seeking out Jesus and conforming my life to his, making room for him rather than merely disciplining my body.

Perhaps that is why Jesus links the taking up of the **cross** with this kind of denial of oneself: *“let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

Now, this is extraordinary; in the Roman Empire, crucifixion was reserved for slaves, pirates, and enemies of the state. Even women and children were not exempt. It was for the lowest in society. By choosing such a symbol, Jesus yet again revealed the dissonance between human pride and the values of the Kingdom of God; the difference between what God sees as valuable and what humankind sees as shameful. He who would suffer on such a cross, demanded nothing less of his disciples; to make a choice; to choose him; to bear witness to him. And what is the word that means ‘to bear witness’? Martyrdom. In choosing Jesus, we bear witness to his costly grace. Our ‘martyrdom’ is a means by which his grace continues to flood a broken world – and in all those areas that Fr. Bennett mentioned last week at the end of his sermon because God is love and that love was perfected in Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of love is a direct consequence of the costly grace.

The late Cardinal Basil Hume once said, *“Love was a reality in God long before it ever became an experience between humans...If we want to know what love truly is, then we shall not do so until we see God in vision.”*²

This is what Jesus was doing throughout his ministry, allowing his disciples to recognize that kind of love and that it was real and not imagined. And so, Jesus called his disciples to learn from him and to have the same kind of relationship that he had with his heavenly Father, thus he revealed his love through what the world saw as weak and vulnerable. Note that Jesus does not ask his followers to take up *the* Cross. Only he can take *the* Cross and only he can die for the whole human race, thus revealing the glory of God through that salvific work of redemption. Jesus asks his followers to take up *their own* cross and follow him. And he says this to each of us again and again, and especially when we fall – for tradition says that the Lord himself fell three times on the way to Golgotha – and three times got up again.

Speaking of these personal crises that we all have and reflecting on the invitation of Jesus to take up our cross, St. Augustine said, *“Whether therefore they be threats or caresses, or whatsoever hindrances there be, if you wish to follow, turn them into your cross, bear it, carry it, do not give way beneath it. There seems to be an exhortation to martyrdom in these words of the Lord.”* (Sermon 46)

But, earlier in this sermon, I said that Lent was a preparation for the celebration of Holy Week. And, as I said a couple of weeks ago, even when we are entering into the darkness of Good Friday, we glimpse the hope of Easter. We know how the story ends – we know that it will lead to Resurrection. Thus, in asking us to take up our cross, the Lord is not inviting us to perpetually live in pain and anguish – the crosses that we take up will also be laid down because of his Resurrection which has conquered death and put sin to flight:

“When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?” says St. Paul. (1 Corinthians 15:54-55)

Or, as Basil Hume also said, *“Behind every crucifix, hidden, for we cannot see him, stands our risen Lord. Hidden in every suffering and pain is the joy of closer union with him. His is the victory. He invites us to share it.”*³

My dear friends, be faithful this Lent, but be kind to yourselves. As Sr. Promise reminded us during yesterday’s Lenten retreat, we follow Jesus because he offers us forgiveness, yes even a second chance – as she said, “forgiveness again and again is amazing!” He can do this because he has carried his own cross – a cross that brings hope out of darkness and leads to the fullness of life with God. The cross that Jesus carries is not an example of the small crosses that we bear during our own earthly pilgrimage; the cross that Jesus

takes up is the weight of my sin, all sin, and as he tried to tell Peter and those first disciples, he would also take up his life again. Jesus does not want us to wallow in self-pity or to be ashamed. He invites us to look through his cross to the glory of his Resurrection - to live in hope. Yes, to lose our lives in order to find them! To be like Abraham, who received a new name, who discovered his real self. Once we understand this, Lent becomes a new springtime in our lives as our Lenten discipline becomes less about denying things and more about denying myself the temptation to live in my own little world and to make God in my own image. Thus, in Lent, we prepare again to enter into the mystery of Christ's redeeming love and remind ourselves of the true cost of grace, but how that grace turns self-denial into a better kind of existence. It is why we do this every year - yes, every year again and again and again - we have the season of Lent that lead us into Holy Week every year because we are not quite there yet. It is a *process* of conversion that leads to a deepening of our faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood that taking up his own cross would require him to bear witness to Jesus and to be true to his own calling. In his case, it truly led to martyrdom. He understood how costly grace could be:

*"Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it causes to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it cost a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life."*⁴

¹. Dietrich Bonhoeffer - 'The Cost of Discipleship' page 44, (Kindle edition)

². Basil Hume - 'The Mystery of Love', DLT 2000, page 22

³. 'The Mystery of Love' page 26

⁴. 'The Cost of Discipleship' page 45 (Kindle edition)