

**Grace Lutheran Church**  
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16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 12, 2021  
“Losing the World and Saving Your Life” (Mark 8:27-38)  
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

Every Thursday at 11 the Synod’s Communications ministry hosts a Zoom call for rostered leaders. When I am able to join I always find it very helpful. This past week it was once again devoted to the pandemic. During the discussion one pastor raised this question: “What are you all doing to provide pandemic coping resources to your congregations?”

This made me sit up and think. We are having to cope, aren’t we? On the surface we are toughing through this because we must. Wearily, we carry our masks with us and put them on wherever they are required or recommended. But coping is stressful. Every pandemic day of abnormal life requires that we bring to it new energy to cope. Of course there are strategies: Take breaks from the news. Make time to unwind. Take care of your body. Connect with others. Focus on the facts—facts such as that the emergence of new, more contagious variants of the virus is being driven by uncontrolled transmission. The more people infected, the more dangerous it becomes for everyone. If only we could summon this the unity of mind that we bring to other disasters, such as hurricanes or floods, or that which briefly brought Americans together in the wake of 9/11!

But there is another ongoing concern with which we are having to cope, whose stress also lies beneath the surface: The decline of the church. Now I do not believe for a second that “the church is dying,” as the media likes to claim every so often for splashy headlines. But I have heard stories here, as I did in my previous congregations, about how the church used to be full, Sunday School was overflowing, you had to come early to get a good seat. But that was, what, 40, 50, 60 years ago? Since then it’s been a different story. Attendance is dwindling and churches are closing, as Lou and Cathy’s and my first-call church both did last year.

And why? Belligerently, pastors complain that they are fighting a losing battle against modern families and their priorities, with sports practices, games, and even tournaments now routinely scheduled on Sunday mornings. But we must take a larger view. To my mind, the problem is that Christians today are neglecting the church’s central symbol—the cross. We have largely forgotten what the cross of Christ is and what it means.

In Jesus’ time, the cross was the ultimate instrument of punishment wielded by the Roman Empire against criminals and especially political activists who spoke out against the oppression of Roman authority. The idea of taking up one’s cross meant to stand openly against the Emperor, and to risk public denunciation and possibly the horrendous death of crucifixion. Jesus was public enemy number one because the kingdom of love that he proclaimed, in which the last are first and those at the edges of society are welcomed into the center, turned the

hierarchy of the Roman Empire upside down, and huge crowds were following him everywhere. So he had to be eliminated.

In the garden before his betrayal we see a soul deeply troubled by what was to come. But when the deed had been accomplished Jesus gave himself up completely: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." In the beautiful language of Philippians 2 in the King James Version, "he...became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

This obedience to God in the form of radical, self-emptying love is also what defines the true Christian. Paul describes it perfectly in that same passage from Philippians:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

This way of the heart is what will rescue the church from cultural obscurity. Dare we embrace it? In the kingdom that Jesus came proclaiming, God stands not with the rich and powerful but with those at the margins, and especially with those who do not know God and those who feel they have been abandoned. For wasn't this Jesus' own jarring cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When Jesus calls us to take up our cross, he is demanding no less of us. He is demanding that we stand against those powers that resist the inbreaking of God's kingdom, and that we risk public denunciation because of it.

Every day matters. In our time, both at home and abroad we are seeing the ascent of authoritarian leaders driven by fear who are bending constitutional and human rights in a desperate effort to tighten their grip on power that was ill-gotten to begin with. I think this same fear has caused the church to lose ground. Jesus surely never imagined a landscape of faith so fractured by self-interest -- nor did Martin Luther, whose goal was to reform Roman Catholic abuses, not to give birth to a new church. And yet today there are more than three dozen separate denominations in North America that call themselves Lutheran. Whoever thought this would work?

As church leaders sink further into fear, denominations have become less Christ-centered and more doctrinal. Rigid orthodoxy is a death knell for the church because it takes the matter of faith out of the hands of the God who has promised to maintain it, and puts it in the hands of people who need to control what people believe.

Just as Jesus found his true identity on the cross, we must go there to recover our true identity as Christians. Listen again to him: **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>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.”**

Only when the church lets go of its focus on itself, and takes up Jesus’ radical commitment to love of neighbor, will it once again become sustainable. Only when we put to death the world and its orthodoxies of power will we save our lives in Christ.

Yesterday we were reminded to look back to what happened 20 years ago. Today here at Grace it is a time for us to look at the present. Today we stand together at the threshold of another year of ministry together. New challenges and new opportunities stretch before us. I hope you will all stop at the Ministry Fair after church to get more of a sense of all that is going on here, and to see where you might step in and make a difference.

Beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, we could be on the cusp of a brand-new era for this church and possibly for the entire church. But it hinges our response to Jesus’ call. Will you take up the self-emptying cross that Jesus is calling you to carry today? As the pandemic rages, will you take up the self-emptying cross that Jesus is calling you to carry and do what is required to save lives and bring hope? Will you take up the self-emptying cross that Jesus is calling you to carry today and let it claim every aspect of your life, so that God’s love can be poured into your heart and out into the world?

Knowing of God’s boundless forgiveness and great faithfulness to us in all circumstances of life, will you take up your cross and follow Jesus into the future of the world that God so loves?

Amen.