

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 25-26, 2011
Matthew 10:34-42

“The Cost of the Cross”

The words of Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson, at least the first six verses, are unsettling, maybe even shocking. How can this be? Isn’t Jesus the Prince of Peace, prophesied by Isaiah (see Isaiah 9:6)? It goes against our popular notion and understanding of who Jesus is to hear what he tells us: **“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”** (Matthew 10:34). What is Jesus talking about? And what does this mean for us as his disciples? We’ll look at Jesus’ words from today’s Gospel lesson under the theme, “The Cost of the Cross.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

School is out, and we are now officially in summer. In the life of the Church, we’re now in that long season after Pentecost that runs from June through November – about six months. This is when the color green is on the altar. Green is the color of life, growth and vitality in the natural world around us. In this summer season, vegetables in the garden are growing like gangbusters, flowers are in bloom, and the trees give us a canopy of shade. There’s a lot going on! This is the image of the Church in this long season after Pentecost – a lot going on as we respond to all that God in Christ has done for us. The church year is divided into two halves: the festival half from Advent through Pentecost, and the non-festival half from Pentecost until Advent. The first half follows the life of Jesus – his birth, his life and ministry, his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, the sending of the Holy Spirit, as depicted on the wooden plaques behind us on the wall of the choir loft (*invite people to turn around and look at these*). And now, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us through Word and Sacrament, we respond in faith to the redeeming work of Jesus through lives that are fruitful and productive – just like plants in the garden are fruitful and productive. This fruitfulness and productivity comes from receiving in faith all that Jesus has done for us, and in response taking up our cross and following Jesus. The cost of the cross for Jesus was his very life. But what is the cost of the cross for us in following Jesus?

Today’s Gospel lesson is set in the context of Jesus’ commissioning and sending out the twelve disciples in Matthew 10. Our Lord doesn’t mince words or gloss over the harsh realities of carrying the Gospel message of repentance and new life in Him out into the world. It’s not going to be a cushy job; it will be hard and demanding work. It was then and it is now. Jesus’ coming into the world was to bring the good news of forgiveness, life, and salvation in his Name to the world – to all people in the world. The lifeblood which Jesus poured out on the cross was and is for the life of the world. The truth is that not all people in the world will welcome or receive life in Jesus’ Name; many will reject it. And it is this rejection of Jesus and his Gospel that divides people against one another, splitting apart even members of the same family. And this becomes the sticking point for us as disciples of Jesus today: we may have hard choices to make. We don’t want to alienate family members by our faith, but we want to follow Jesus. Can we have it both ways? Jesus tells us: **“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”** (Matthew 10:37-39).

The cost of the cross can be quite high. Jesus was willing to lay down his life for us. What are we willing to do for him? No longer can we expect people in our culture today to share the same core beliefs or world view that we do. What we do expect is that people in our culture today will be ambivalent, maybe even hostile, to the message of the Gospel. For many, the message of the cross belongs to another era and is outdated. For many, the message of the cross is too restrictive and narrow. Many reject the Gospel because the message of the cross is seen as only one way to get to heaven; they believe there are many others. This is reality in our pluralistic post-modern world today. To affirm that salvation is in Jesus alone is counter-cultural, and it does divide people. When all is said and done, we do not follow Jesus as we ought. We do not take up our cross as we ought. We shrink back from a clear witness to Jesus in our lives because we are afraid of what others will think or say about us. What we fail to do, Jesus has done for us. Though we may fail to take up our cross for Christ, he did this for us. Jesus took up his cross and not only carried it, but was nailed to it. He suffered and died upon that cross to pay the penalty for all our sins – the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do. In him, there is forgiveness and new life.

To belong to Christ is a privilege so valuable that no other relationship can replace it. To follow Christ is a calling so important that every other obligation must give way to this. Bearing the cross for Christ does not refer to any general affliction that comes upon a person in the course of this life. Bearing the cross for Christ does mean submitting all that we are and have to Jesus, and come what may, following where he leads, trusting that he himself is with us even to the end of the world, reflecting him in word and deed, even bearing reproach for the sake of his Name. In so doing, we find ourselves. In losing our lives by the world's standards, in Jesus we are blessed with peace and joy in this life that the world cannot give, and eternal life with Jesus forever.

Jesus says a lot about the difficulties his followers will encounter as we carry out our mission. But he concludes by promising a blessing – a reward – to those who support the Gospel message and those who proclaim it. Even giving a cup of cold water to support of one of his disciples carries with it the Lord's blessing. And yet no reward can match the blessing of the forgiveness of sin, life, peace, and joy that is ours in Christ Jesus. The One who has taken up his cross for us will strengthen us to carry our cross for him. Amen.