

"The Saltire Cross: The Cross of Humility"

Matthew 16:24-27

Midweek Lent 1

Messiah, Boerne

February 21, 2024

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Text: Matthew 16:24-26

Dear Friends in Christ:

Were I to tell you that light is darkness, that black is white, or that up is down, I couldn't turn the world more upside-down than the cross does. The cross so reverses the way things work in the world that one can hardly comprehend how totally *opposite* it is from the way to which we are accustomed. Christ calls His followers to the way of self-imposed weakness, of self-sacrifice, of losing one's life to gain it, of self-denial, of *humility*. He overturns everything the world tries to use to impress us. It's like saying that light is darkness or that up is down.

The problem is that when everything is overturned by the cross then those things that appear to be *weaknesses* come out as "virtues." For example, the world wants us to be modest, which means we should *appear* to be humble. But when a person actually *acts* humbly, the world interprets it as a lack of courage or strength, as cowardice and weakness. Who wants to lie down like

a doormat and be walked all over? Or who respects someone who does that?

But Jesus says that the way of *humility* is precisely the way of strength and courage. He shows how humility that leads to service is, in fact, a way of living with power. This is the very truth to which our text this evening points us. It tells us that humility is that courageous act of strength by which we give away all claims on life in order that our life might be grounded in God alone. Thus, we must focus our attention on the One who gave this instruction so that we can find out from His life what all this means.

Now, one fact quickly catches the attention of anyone who reads the Gospel accounts about Jesus' life: He never sought anything for Himself by the way He lived and worked among people. All the Gospel narratives tell of a self-giving man whose entire life was devoted to giving Himself away. Everything He did was designed to *help* others, not to gain something for Himself personally, even though there were times when people wanted to "reward" Him. For example, Satan wanted to "reward" Jesus after His temptation if He would only do his bidding; the crowds wanted to make Jesus their king after the feeding of the 5,000; the crowds on Palm Sunday wanted to raise Jesus to the throne of His father David if He would save them

from Rome; and onlookers at the crucifixion offered to believe in Jesus if He would come down from the cross.

Jesus was committed to only one thing, however—service to His heavenly Father from the cradle to the grave. Doing “the things of God” involved more than just little exercises in piety. It meant more to Jesus than just reading the Scriptures daily or faithful attendance at the synagogue. These things had their place and were important in Jesus’ commitment to knowing and doing the Father’s will, but they are what *enabled* Him to turn outward again in concern for those around Him. Serving God meant loving care for those who needed Him.

The vital point of all this is that Jesus gave Himself *freely* in all of life (not just in death). *Nothing*—not even His life—was taken from Him by force. He was His “own person,” meaning that He gave His life as He pleased to God and for others out of a deep inner strength. He set Himself to live a life of total giving. That’s what it means to be human in the most complete sense of the term—not to do what we want to do, but to do what the Father *wills* for us to do.

You see, in the act of giving Himself, Jesus became the model person for *all* people, the One in whom all humanity could find its true purpose and through whom full humanity could be restored among us. That is what made His *humility* so remarkable. It was not a result of weakness but a *self-imposed*

weakness, thereby overturning all the world's ideas about strength and its consequences. Jesus proposed that saving the world must be done from a position of *servanthood*, from a stance of *giving*—even if it meant giving up one's life. Thus, if ever the values of the world have been turned topsy-turvy, it happened in this Man of Nazareth, whose throne was a cross and whose crown was made of thorns. And we are to be *like* Him, to follow in His footsteps.

The form of the cross to which our attention is drawn this evening is formally called the *Saltire* cross, although a more common name for it is the Cross of St. Andrew. Little is known of the later life of Andrew, brother of Peter, but a very old tradition says that Andrew was martyred by crucifixion. On that occasion, it is said, he pleaded himself unworthy to die in the same way that Jesus had died, so they crucified him on an X-shaped cross such as you see in the Saltire cross.

The same tradition speaks of Andrew as a man of deep *humility*, so the Saltire cross is also often called the Cross of Humility, since it marks in some particular ways the life and death of one of our Lord's apostles. Still other traditions have connected those who were instructed by Andrew with the Christianizing of Scotland. The flag of Scotland has this cross imbedded in that country's national standard. So, this form of

the cross has spoken across the centuries and around the world in forceful ways of Christian humility.

This cross calls you to follow in the footsteps of the disciple after whom it is named. He had learned the secret of humility from Jesus Himself. He had taken seriously the words, "Take up your cross and follow me." The Saltire Cross calls on you to do the very same thing.

Now, one of the first things you learn from Jesus about the Cross of Humility is the simple yet profound truth that, in reality, you have no life to give away. Your life did not self-originate nor is it sustained apart from the Giver of life. The life you are to "deny" and "lose" is itself from God and is only "on loan," so-to-speak. The only power you have is to determine who will, in the end, have any say over your life. To "have faith" is purely and simply to believe and live as though God alone has claim on your life and to reserve it in all its parts for *His* use.

Having established that fundamental understanding, it seems a contradiction to say that your life does, indeed, belong to you because God hands it over to you so that you might responsibly use it to His honor. In other words, He who owns it gives it into your care with the understanding that you must one day give an account of what you have done with it. Jesus speaks of this responsibility in our text: "The Son of Man is going to

come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done" (v 27). So, what will you do with the life God has planted into your body as His gift to you? To deal with that question, you must make an honest *inventory* of what God has given to you so that it is openly at your disposal.

You see, it's only when you know in true humility the *strengths* God has given to you that you can know what lies at your disposal for giving to others. Consider this: If Christ had denied what was given to Him, He could never have served us. He would have ended up a forgotten carpenter in Nazareth and the world would still be in sin and darkness. Only the most honest evaluation of the gifts God has given to you can make you available to lead others from your strengths. Then you can serve others: husband, wife, children, neighbors, community, the needy, the voiceless, the powerless, the wounded, and the miserable. Then you begin to see the gifts at your disposal with the same kind of vision that led Andrew to the Humility Cross and that led Jesus to the cross of your salvation.

Here you catch a glimpse into the deepest part of the text's urgent admonition to deny yourself. Jesus is not simply promoting little programs of self-denial for Lent but a whole way of life, or as Jesus says, a way of losing one's life to Him who is life itself. There is a sense in which it is an act of

strength, for it means that you give your life over to God, who is far larger than your own petty projects, your own self-chosen works. On the other hand, it is an act of the mercy of God, who calls you from petty projects into the service of all those around you in the name of Jesus Christ.

The closer you get to this One, who gave His life away with such strength, the more you know the *truth* of what He says when He tells you that it profits us none to gain the whole world while forfeiting our life.

At the same time, you will find His *strength* in you as you grow closer to Him. For when Christ lives in you, He who gave Himself away to others with such intense strength begins to stir things up in you also so that your life, affected and changed by Him, turns outward to those who need the strength of your life. Life filled with Christ's life no longer has room for the old person, but a new being now lays claim to all that you do. He who comes to you in the words of Scripture and through the tangible, earthly forms of the Sacraments will draw you up into a vision of and participation in a life beyond anything you can imagine.

Dear Friends in Christ, it looks so risky at first when you are told to give away all that has made your life seem secure. The world tells you that nothing can give you the security you have known through its possessions. That's why you can't simply

look at the way, but you must rather look at the One who calls you to follow Him. If you want courage to travel this way, watch Jesus mounting the Cross of Humility, entrusting Himself to the Father in death, and watch what happens to Him when He walks this upside-down way. "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." It's the journey of Lent, the journey of the cross, and having journeyed with Jesus, you will be blessed. Amen.