



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

August 31, 2008

Reverend Donna Barr

Proper 17A

Let us pray.....

Lord Jesus, in this hour let us hear again your call “Follow me.” Accept this offering to embrace what we have and who we are for your name sake. Make your way be clear before us. Amen

“It is the highest responsibility to preach against Christianity.”

This is a quote from the Danish Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Now you might want to ask here.....was he a Christian? Far from being anti-Christian, Kierkegaard loved Jesus and his great purpose in life was to renew Christianity. So why would he write in his book *Works of Love*, “it is of the highest responsibility, to preach in Christian sermons—yes, precisely in Christian sermons—AGAINST Christianity. For the Danish philosopher, Christianity should come with a warning label—a clear, unmistakable notice of the dangerousness of faith in Jesus Christ. And why not? We put warning labels on everything from dangerous machinery, to medicine bottles, to even a cup of coffee at McDonalds. Christianity, at its best, threatens to change your life. Shouldn’t it also come with a warning label? Perhaps Bibles should have labels too.

Warning:

People who live the life advocated by this book may suffer persecution and death.

This is absolutely why the Rev. Daniel Berrigan said, “If you are going to follow Jesus, you'd better look good on wood.” Daniel Berrigan was on to something, “If you are going to follow Jesus, you'd better look good on wood.” Historically speaking, Christians who genuinely conformed their lives to that of Jesus Christ didn’t fare

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Established in 1847*

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too well. This is why Søren Kierkegaard felt it was of the highest priority to preach against Christianity.

Kierkegaard was in favor of the sort of warning Jesus gave his disciples in our Gospel reading for this morning.

“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.”

This was even more distressing to his disciples to hear than it is to us. We have the hindsight offered by the resurrection. We know the whole plan can and did work. Peter and the other disciples only know that Jesus' talk of suffering and death does not sound like God's plan. Peter in a rare subtle move takes Jesus aside before speaking up. When they are alone, Peter admonishes Jesus, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Then Jesus turns and says 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.” This is the same Peter, who Jesus in the reading last Sunday called, Peter the Rock on which he would build his church. In just moments, Peter goes from solid rock foundation to stumbling block. Whenever we try to hinder God's will, we become a stumbling block. The Greek word for a stumbling block is “skandalon.” “A stumbling block” is literally “a scandal.”

”Coming to terms with the fact that God loves you so much that Jesus would suffer and die rather than give up on that love is a scandal. We Christians are called to embrace the scandal of the cross, pray for God's will in our lives and move on to living that life of faith. So what does it mean to take up your cross and follow Jesus? A common phrase we hear so often is, “Well, I guess it's just my cross to bear.” Nobody else is going to bear your cross for you. Why we all have to take up our crosses isn't terribly clear. God just wants us burdened? Likes it when we suffer? That hardly seems likely, especially since Christians are the ones who teach about the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. We need add nothing to what Jesus has done. Christ came to take our burden upon him, not to pile more weight on us. But we still have these crosses. We get sick, our kids get in trouble, we lose our jobs, we lose the ones we love -- we are lonely and we are afraid. So then, is taking up our crosses about having patience and endurance in hopeless situations? Should we just grin and bear it, putting on that Christian smile as we wait out our situations? Is that what it means to be a follower of Christ?

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May I suggest that "Take up your cross" is not about patience or endurance or looking like a joyful Christian; actually it not about this at all..... it's about an embrace. Embracing the scandal. Don't hide from your cross. Don't deny your cross. Don't change the subject every time your cross comes up. Take it up and let it out! Don't let your cross turn you into anything less than the human being God made you, no matter what it takes from you in the end.

Two weeks ago, fifteen of us women here at St. John's spent less than 24 hours together at St. Anne's Convent. A short pilgrimage, as it was, turned out to be an incredibly important moment in our journeys with God. We worshiped and prayed, we sang and we listened, we laughed and we cried. As Paul put it, "we rejoiced and we wept with each other." But something of much more import happened on this retreat. We all came carrying those personal crosses with us. But we didn't try to hide them or pretend they weren't with us....we began to embrace them. One of our exercises on the retreat was to pick a quote or saying or scripture to share with others. One quote I shared was this, "Remember that everyone you meet is carrying a heavy burden."

Just another way of looking at carrying the cross. We all came home from the retreat still carrying the crosses we came with; the load was just a little bit lighter as healing came by sharing with one another our stories of faith, hope, and love. What we learned was that our individual crosses, if embraced, becomes the Way. It empowers us in ways that we would never have imagined if we were well, or rich, or not lonely, or if we had our old job back. And another thing we learned was that the public presence of our cross in the world empowers other people, too: some help you carry it. Some watch you and pray for you. Some remember how much they love you. Some of them will take you down from its hardness in the end and gently lay you to rest. They will never forget your cross and it will help them bear their own. And some of them will become activists on behalf of those who cannot embrace their own crosses.

You too can find your own way to take up your cross and follow Jesus. It begins with showing love and compassion and it never ends. Jesus says that if you are willing to lose your life in this way, you will find it. Being a Christian is dangerous stuff. I absolutely recommend it..... but here is the WARNING.

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People who follow Jesus may suffer...that is, if we get it right, if we really live out the love and compassion  
Jesus wants us to live in service to one another. Amen

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