

**Proper 19B
September 13, 2009
Mark 8:27-38**

When my nephews were little and they would stay overnight at my parents' house, my mother always tried to do the right thing by them. They are Catholic, so she would dutifully dress them up and take them off to mass.

One Sunday, she got them settled in the pew, and the readings began. My nephew Dan said, in a not-too-quiet whisper, "We've heard this one before. I hate going to church. It's always re-runs." And my nephew Art muttered in his ear, "Atheist! Atheist!" "Rerun!" "Atheist!" "Rerun!" "Atheist!" My poor mother ...

Well, I don't think it makes you an atheist if you are disturbed when the reading is a re-run. We had this very same gospel lesson, exactly, six months ago, on March 8, 2009, the second Sunday of Lent. Do you remember?

Just six months, not all that long ago. Maybe you do remember. Maybe you have taped to your computer monitor, or stuck up on your refrigerator a now-yellowing portion of the bulletin insert, with these words highlighted ...

"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."

Maybe you went home and did what I suggested in the sermon that day. Do you remember?

I said that I hoped each of you would -- “Take your bulletins home. Paste this lesson up somewhere prominent. Find it in your Bibles at home and mark it, highlight it, break the spine on the book so that it will always fall open to these words. Perhaps we can make this the journey of Lent, the journey of our lives -- to really hear these words, to really get them, to really live them out, every day:”

That was six months ago. Six short months to live with these words of Jesus, to live into these words of Jesus. Six months of taking up a cross. Six months of denying ourselves. Six months of following Jesus. Six months of losing our lives, over and over and over again, for the sake of Jesus Christ, and for the sake of the gospel.

So, six months later, how is that cross-bearing business working out for you?

Or did you already forget?

Sometimes it’s not so bad to get a rerun. Especially with a lesson like this, a lesson that brings us face to face with reality. The reality of what it means to be a Christian. The reality of what it means to follow Jesus.

I don’t want to scare anyone off today ... especially since it is the launch of a new program year, the day we bless our church school teachers, the day we display all our ministries and programs at the Ministries Fair. It is a day to be excited about all the possibilities of the months ahead, a day to be energized about our life together here at All Saints.

But here is our gospel lesson, just another big old rerun, once more reminding us what Jesus believes that being a Christian means: “If any want to become my followers,” he says, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

It can sound daunting. Or depressing. Or difficult. After all, if we lose our lives, won’t we just lose them? And shouldn’t we try to hang on to what we’ve got ... the economy is so brutal and things are so hard right now.

Can't we just be nice? Can't we just be good? Can't we just enjoy one another, the fellowship we find here at All Saints, the music, the worship ... the food? Does being a Christian mean all that ... self-denial, cross-carrying, Christ-following stuff? Do we have to?

Well, no we don't. We can come to church and enjoy the many wonderful things All Saints offers, from Joe Sheedy's popcorn to the booming Sunday School, to the care and concern of a community that knows how to reach out and make a difference in the world. That's good. That's fine. We don't have to go any deeper than that.

Or we can come to church because we seek our own self-fulfillment or personal growth, or a connection to the divine, or a safe place to ask hard questions. That's important too, to tend to our inner natures and our inner needs. There is plenty to do even if that is all we do.

But what if we could see our fellowship, our worship, our service, our life together here at All Saints, carrying our crosses, following our Jesus ... what if we could see that as a Way that leads to something larger, more powerful, and more life-giving than anything we have ever known before? What if we found it to be a door opening into mystery? What if we discovered in it a call that lays its claim upon us, molds us, makes us, breaks us and remakes us? What if we could catch a glimpse of all the dimensions of the vision that Jesus sets before us today?

It's like the story of the three bricklayers. A man came upon three workmen laying bricks, and he asked the first, "What are you doing?" "What does it look like I'm doing?" the man said, "I'm laying bricks." He asked the same question of the second man, who answered, "I'm doing my job, so that I can put a roof over my family's head and food on the table."

Then he came to the third bricklayer. "What are you doing?" he asked. "I'm building a cathedral," the man replied.

Each of those men responded in a way that was accurate and truthful. And if I came down the aisle and asked any one of you, “What are you doing?” the answers would probably be much the same. Someone might say, “I’m sitting here in church, listening to a sermon.” Another person might say, “I’m getting some spiritual and moral guidance so that I can be a better person.”

And maybe someone might respond like that third bricklayer, maybe one, or two, or ten, or three dozen of you might say, “I’m here to offer and present my self, my soul and body to the Lord. I’m here to pick up my cross and follow right behind him in his footsteps. I’m here so that I can share in Christ’s work of transforming and reconciling the world.

I’m here because I want nothing less than to be transformed.”

My prayer for the months ahead of us is for exactly this. That this community will become a cathedral – a cathedral built out of people who have offered themselves, their lives, their hearts to Jesus Christ. Who are longing to be transformed. Who are willing to become an earthly sanctuary for the majesty and mercy of God.

Not to be a building of brick and wood – our building is beautiful, but the building could fall down tomorrow and we would still be All Saints Episcopal Church.

No, my prayer is that this parish, that All Saints Episcopal Church will become a community of people as expansive, as magnificent, as profound and visible a witness to God as any cathedral built of brick and mortar. That our hearts become as open and encompassing as any Gothic nave. That our words and our way of being together blend like the harmony of an exquisite choir. That our diversity of age and race and gender and ideologies will shine out like the multi-colored hues of stained glass windows. That the doors of our fellowship will be flung wide open so that all may enter. That the numinous, mysterious, powerful and provoking presence of God may become incarnate on the altars of our souls.

The only way I know how to do that is to do what Jesus tells his friends and us this morning. Yes, it's a rerun, but let's hear it afresh. Let's allow it to re-enter our hearts and minds. Let's reaffirm the call that Jesus lays upon us over and over and over again.

It is this: for all of us, together, to take up the cross he has given us to bear. His own cross, his own gesture of complete, self-giving love for the world. To take up that cross, as individuals, and as a community of faith, and to walk forward. Step by step. Into the journey. Into the mystery. Into the amazing expanse of God's redeeming love for all.