

Today, February 18, is the commemoration day in the church calendar for Martin Luther. He died on this day in 1546 at the age of 62. Of his many accomplishments, one that stands out on a Wednesday evening when many confirmation students are present is his writing of the Small Catechism, that small booklet that for generations has been a primary text book for Lutheran confirmation classes.

There are times when I wish Jesus had had the opportunity to take a Lutheran confirmation class before he said some of the things he said so that he would have had the opportunity to fine-tune some of his teachings. For those of us who grew up in the Lutheran church and went to confirmation classes, we have firmly embedded in our brains the Apostle Paul's words: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2)

"What must we do to be in a right relationship with God?" the pastor asks us. The correct Lutheran response is, "Absolutely nothing, but simply receive with a grateful and humble heart the gift of salvation God has given us in Jesus Christ. We don't have to do anything, because God, in Christ, has done everything." That's the gospel in a nutshell, and we Lutherans know that inside and out.

It kind of bothers me that Jesus sometimes says things that would indicate that he doesn't understand this as clearly as I do. Take our gospel readings from last Sunday and this evening, for example. Jesus begins by describing what the future holds for him – being arrested, put to death, and rising on the third day. So far, so good. Jesus dies for us and by his resurrection conquers sin and death. That's the gospel we know and love. Keep on preaching it, Jesus.

But then Jesus slips a little and he begins talking about what we're supposed to "do" and our Lutheran ears begin to tingle because we know that we don't have to do anything because Jesus does it all. But Jesus forges ahead with this line of thought, last Sunday saying "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." And in today's reading he says to the disciples who are arguing over which of them is the most important, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." And by "become like children" he doesn't mean cute and sweet, but someone who has no power and is dependent on others.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. What are we going to do with you? If only you might have had the benefit of a Lutheran confirmation class so that you might have clarified these teachings a little more to our liking. You would know that we don't have to "do" anything to enter the kingdom of heaven.

But let's give Jesus the benefit of the doubt and consider more closely what he has to say. After all, he is the Son of God and Lord of the church. Let's assume that he knows what he's talking about when he describes what being a disciple entails and that he really does expect us to pick up a cross now and then and have the mindset of a servant or child who has no power. What would such a life look like?

Jesus doesn't give us a specific list of things to do, nor describe exactly what he means by "picking up a cross". Actually, that is quite wise on his part, because if he had listed three or seven or twenty-five things that are such crosses, our human nature would be to do those things and then we'd be off the hook of being responsible for anything else. By simply telling us to "pick up our cross", we are left with a daily, life-long process of discerning what crosses God is calling us to pick up.

Over the generations, the church has come to some consensus as to what some of these crosses are, actions that we are not forced to do but we can choose to do. Over that past few years we at St. Barnabas have been using a list of six activities called the "marks of discipleship." This is not intended to be a complete list and I have seen other such lists that vary a little bit, but this one is pretty good. This particular list came from a book called *Powersurge* written by Michael Foss, former pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville. Pastor Foss suggests that the marks of discipleship are:

- Daily prayer
- Weekly worship
- Bible reading
- Service in and beyond the congregation
- Spiritual friendships
- Giving time, talents and resources

I'd like to suggest to you that these marks of discipleship are some of the basic crosses that all who follow Jesus are called to pick up. They are activities that we are not compelled to do. God does not love us more or less based on how faithfully we do them. Yet the witness of the church over the generations is that we should do these things. Why?

I am saved by God's grace, not by what I do. That is the gospel truth. So why should I take time for daily prayer? Why should I participate in a small group during Lent? Why should I make the effort to worship each week and be part of a Christian community? Why should I give of my time to help someone in need or to work for justice in our community and nation? Why should I put my money in the offering plate or take some of my precious time and be a small group confirmation leader or sing in the choir or help with the kitchen ministry?

I am tempted to try to convince you we should do these things because of the benefit we receive in doing them. We will in some way be better people, have more fulfilled lives, be more content and satisfied, perhaps even live longer. I could make those arguments (and you've heard me do just that at times, like when I tell you that you will personally benefit by being part of a Lent small group). There's even a great deal of truth to those arguments, but if the reason for picking up these crosses is simply for our own benefit, the end result is that they're worthless.

There is one and only one reason to pick up these crosses we call the marks of discipleship. There is one and only one reason to receive the mark of the ashes, a reminder of our total dependence upon God. This one and only reason is stated most eloquently by Isaac Watts in this next hymn we're about to sing. Take a hymnal and turn to hymn #803. In the first three stanzas, Watts describes the wondrous cross, by which Jesus unilaterally accomplished our salvation. Then he closes with this magnificent last stanza:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*

What stands out for me in these words is his pairing of the words "love" and "demands". We usually think of love as "giving" something, not "demanding" something. But, says Watts, a love so amazing as God has shown us in Jesus "demands" my soul, my life, my all. I understand the words "soul, life, and all" here not to describe three different things, but rather are three terms to describe the same thing – my total existence. The realization of God's love for me demands, calls forth, puts a claim on, my entire existence – my time, my money, my relationships – everything.

Why should we pick up the crosses of the marks of discipleship? Why has the church developed the tradition that Lent is a time to give extra attention to "doing" these marks of discipleship, using it like spring training to focus on the fundamentals and get in good shape spiritually? At the most basic level, there is only one proper reason – because these things are pleasing to God. In our imperfect human relationships, we know what's it like to do something for someone we love – we do it not because we have to or because we're expected to, but for no other reason than we know that doing this will bring our loved one pleasure and joy. That's the core reason for voluntarily modifying our lifestyles and living the marks of discipleship – not because we have to or because we're expected to, but for no other reason than we know that doing these things will bring God pleasure and joy. "*Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*"