

EMBRACE THE CROSS OF CHRIST. Pentecost 17 – Sept 13/16, 2018

Mark 8:27-35 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Dear Christian Friends:

"The waves and the wind [that] this storm may bring is nothing like you've ever seen. Even if you've ridden out storms before, this one is different. Don't bet your life on riding out a monster." That's what North Carolina governor, Roy Cooper, said about hurricane Florence. It is turning out to be one of the most powerful hurricanes ever to hit the Carolina coast. That's why state and local governments issued mandatory evacuation orders for people living along the coast. This hurricane is immensely powerful. It is unavoidable. It will make land fall. It will cause wide-spread, unprecedented destruction.

There is also something else that is immensely powerful, unavoidable, and causes wide-spread, unprecedented destruction. It is the cross. It is Christ's cross. It is also your cross.

When it comes to the cross, Jesus tells us to do the opposite of what governments are ordering in the face of Hurricane Florence. Instead of telling us to run away from the destructive fury of the cross, Jesus tells us to embrace

it. Jesus says, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.**

For you and me, embracing the cross does not mean being nailed to an ancient Roman instrument of torture. It means suffering for the sake of Christ. Embracing the cross means loyalty to Jesus even when Satan storms against us with his temptations to hide our faith. Embracing our cross means holding onto Jesus even when our sinful nature sends wave after wave of doubt to drown our faith. Embracing the cross means riding out ridicule, persecution, and insults rather than denying our faith in Jesus. So, to be a Christian means: **EMBRACE THE CROSS OF CHRIST.**

Of course, Jesus does not tell us to embrace the cross of suffering for his sake because he likes to see us in pain. No, it's the opposite. Jesus does not want us to suffer. Jesus wants us to be at peace and live in safety. However, Jesus knows how much Satan hates the Christian faith. Jesus knows how much Satan wants to destroy the Christian Church. Jesus knows how this sinful world attacks the truth of God's Word and how it attacks anyone who stands up for God's Word. Jesus knows how painful it is to carry a cross.

But Jesus also knows how much more pain we would suffer if we did not embrace his cross. That's because failing to carry your cross for the sake of Christ means denying Christ himself. So, for example, if you think, "Suffering for the sake of being a Christian is not worth it," then you are not worthy of being a Christian. If you think, "I don't have to be so loyal to Jesus that I would lose my job, or my family, or my friends," then you really do not follow Jesus. Jesus has no place in his Kingdom for fair-weather friends and "easy street" followers.

So, if you put your comfort and your own safety ahead of Christ, then you are not following Christ. You are denying Christ. Jesus once said, **whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.** And if Jesus disowns you before his Father in heaven, you will spend eternity suffering in hell. In hell you will suffer far more than ridicule, insults, and hatred from this world. Suffering in hell means you will endure torture in

body and soul, flames upon flames, and unending misery. In hell there is absolutely no hope of ever getting even the smallest amount of relief.

Jesus wants to spare you from eternal suffering in hell. That's why he tells you to embrace the cross of suffering for his sake. Suffering on earth is only temporary. Suffering in hell is forever.

But you must understand something about suffering for the sake of Christ. Suffering for Christ does not earn your salvation. No, Christ's suffering earned your salvation. So, suffering for the sake of Christ—cross bearing—is a necessary consequence of believing, but it is not a cause of salvation.

It's a bit like this. Sometimes the doctor gives you medicine by injection. Those medicines can prevent the flu or other diseases. Likewise, diabetics inject themselves with insulin. Needles hurt. But needles don't cure you or treat you. It's what the needles put into your body—it's the medicine in the needle that helps you. The painful needle is just the delivery system.

In a way, that's how carrying your cross works. The holy precious blood and the innocent sufferings and death of Christ—that's what saves you. When you embrace the cross of Christ by suffering for Christ you also embrace by faith the blood and righteousness of Jesus. That's what saves you.

And we know that Christ is the only Savior because we know and believe what Saint Peter said in our text. Our Gospel lesson says, **[Jesus] asked [his disciples], "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ."**

A lot of people had a lot of different ideas about Jesus. They were all respectful opinions. After all, John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets were all honorable men. But they were only men. They were only human.

On the other hand, Jesus Christ is both human and true God. Jesus is **the Christ**. That is, Jesus is the Savior God had promised throughout the Old Testament. In our first lesson, Isaiah describes Jesus and speaks for Jesus. He

says, **I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.**

Isaiah describes a Messiah who would save his people by suffering innocently. That's exactly what Jesus did. Jesus says in our Gospel Lesson, **the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. [H]e must be killed and after three days rise again.**

Suffering painful torture and a humiliating death on the cross was the way Jesus carried out his heavenly Father's plan to rescue the world from sin, death, and damnation. So, by his death on the cross, Jesus accomplished what you and I could never accomplish. By his cross Jesus saved us for eternal life.

That's why Jesus rebuked Peter when Peter thought that Jesus should not have to suffer and die. Jesus said to Peter, **"Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."** According to the human way of thinking, you can't win if you suffer and die. You can only win a war if you make your enemy suffer and die. But in the war against sin and Satan, it is the opposite. Jesus won the war for our salvation by suffering and dying. Jesus won the war for our salvation by his cross. That's why we embrace our cross of suffering for the sake of Christ. It's because Jesus embraced his cross of suffering for the sake of our salvation.

Now, suffering for the sake of Christ might seem as foolish as running into the eye of a hurricane. But there's something about an eye of a hurricane. Smack dab in the middle of all that destructive wind and rain, there is calm and peace. That is also true of the cross of Christ. In the eye of the storm that is suffering for Christ, Christ is there for us. Where Christ is, there is peace. There is forgiveness. There is salvation. So, embrace the cross of Christ. Embrace Christ by faith. Embrace his love, his peace, and his salvation. May God grant us all that faith and courage, peace and salvation. May God bless us all for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.