

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

The day I affirmed my baptism, more commonly known as my confirmation day, in the Lutheran faith was a very big day in the life of my family. I had to stand before my congregation and recite a Bible passage chosen for me by my confirmation teacher. I think I can still do it. It was 2nd Timothy Chapter 3, verses 14 and 15. “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” To arrive at this day my parents and I went through two years of rigorous study. We had class every Sunday. We had homework, journaling, reading assignments, memorization quizzes, sermon notes, video classes, worship participation, service projects and tests. Oh the tests. In fact, at my house I still have my final exam of 100 questions. I only missed one, which the teacher didn’t end up counting because all twelve of us missed it. And we also had lectures; lectures for us and our parents where the teacher quoted the baptismal promises our parents made in front of God and the church, the promises that apparently they weren’t keeping when they allowed us to miss class for sporting events or birthday parties or when we came to class unprepared and without our homework. It was a big deal for me to arrive at this moment, the moment I would say that my faith journey was now my responsibility, and that I agreed with my parent’s choice in baptism. It was a big deal to become an adult, voting member in the church. And the day had finally arrived.

My family traveled to Florida from Pennsylvania. My grandparents were there, my Uncle Karl and Aunt Lisa and Becca and Matt had arrived, my brothers were forced to come, and of course my parents. I was very excited. Yes, at this point I was already a church nerd. I was

dressed in my best peach and pearl dress. I knew there would be cake. But what I didn't expect was the presents. My aunt and uncle gave me a story book based on the old testament book of Joshua. The church gave me a LBW, you remember, the green hymnal. But the present I remember most was from my grandparents. It was a small, but beautiful diamond cross, with a gorgeous gold box chain necklace to go with it. I remember opening that box and being shocked that someone would trust me with a necklace that pretty. At that point I didn't own a single diamond. And I remember wondering, yes I know I'm weird, should a cross, or could a cross be that beautiful?

We as Christians have made the symbol of the cross a beautiful piece of artwork. There are paintings, and crucifixes, and bracelets, and anklets, and rings, and tattoos. Crosses are everywhere. They are a sign of salvation. But under that perfect gift from God I think it is important to remember what the cross truly means. The cross marks, for us, a place of uncertainty. It was a place of torture and torment, a place of pain and mocking, and ultimately a place of death. If you remember last week we had Peter proclaiming Jesus' identity as the Son of God, the Messiah. And today Jesus shows us exactly what that means. And the view isn't pretty. It isn't dainty or shiny. It isn't neat or perfect. To be the Messiah, the savior of the world means to constantly have death in plain view. Jesus knew in that moment, the moment we read in our gospel lesson for today, while he was still alive, that he would be tortured, beaten and hung on the cross for the sake of the world. I can't even imagine knowing that and still being able to focus on the here and now; still being able to go about my daily business and not be distracted. And Jesus, he could have chosen not to follow that path, to try and find another way, to not be obedient, but Jesus chose to accept God's purpose for him in his life and in his death.

Much of the time when I hear Christians in conversation talk about taking up their crosses, they act as though the cross is something that happens to them. For example, “I just got diagnosed with breast cancer, I guess that’s my cross to bear.” Or “I was born with curly hair and I’d prefer to have straight hair, I guess that’s my cross to bear.” But that’s not what is happening in this gospel lesson. That’s not what it looks like to carry a cross. What is happening is Jesus is choosing to pick up that cross and die for the sake of the world. It’s not something that happened to him. Jesus was God. Jesus could have walked away. He could have told God “No way!” But he didn’t. He chose to be obedient to God. He chose to be beaten. He chose to be mocked. And he chose to die in accordance with God’s will for the sake of you and for the sake of me. It was a choice. A hard, but necessary choice.

When you hear Jesus say to you, “if any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” What does that mean for you?

I think for a lot of us, like during the season of Lent, we think of it as meaning not eating chocolate for 40 days. We think carrying a cross is denying ourselves things that we love, like spending money, or eating certain foods, or being nice to someone else. But what Jesus is actually saying to us today is not to deny things to yourself, but to actually deny your “self”, your inner you. The self that is focused only on itself. The self that puts its thoughts and desires and wants before others, even before God. The self that says, “I am in charge of myself.” That’s what Jesus is telling us to deny. And he’s instructing us to replace that “self” with the will of God. He’s saying that we are to, “fear, love and trust God above all things.”

Have you ever thought about this before? That to deny yourself is to choose to do something that you don’t really want to do, but something God has made it clear that he wants you to do? Have you been open and willing to listen to God’s will for your life? If the answer is

yes, then I say to you “keep up the good work!” If you haven’t been so open and willing, or even just a good listener, I invite you to consider taking time out of your busy schedule to truly open yourself up to God. God has a plan, a purpose for each one of you. He wants you to choose him. He wants you to turn off the part of yourself that says, “I’m in control. I’m God.” And turn your focus and your attention on him, giving him the place of Lord and Master in your life. He wants you to truly deny your inner self and choose to take up your cross and follow him.

It’s not easy. It wasn’t easy for Jesus. But I invite you today to try and find ways that you can choose to be a follower of Jesus. Start small and work up to the bigger things. Be open and willing. Try out listening during your prayer time and not just talking. God is there with you, waiting for you to hear him, listen to him, and obey him. Amen.