



Altar Call
Sermon by Pastor Jean Duran
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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Each summer, after my 5th and 6th grades, I attended a week-long church camp with a friend of mine at Camp Cedar Crest, which is located in the mountains of Southern California. I **loved** those 2 weeks of camp! Hiking, canoeing, swimming, crafts, sports, bible study and the evening campfire at the end of the day where we would sing silly camp songs like “little bunny foo foo” and “do your ears hang low.” Everything was an adventure for me!

Those evening campfires were silly and fun but they were also inspiring as each night always ended with our camp counselors taking turns giving their testimonies about what it meant to them to **follow Jesus**. After these testimonies, the camp director finished our night together by leading us in prayer and extending an altar call to all the campers.

In our Lutheran tradition, it’s rare to have an “altar call” so, in case you aren’t sure what an “altar call” is, let me explain. An “altar call” it is an invitation for people to come forward to the altar to kneel and to pray and to invite Jesus into their hearts. All week long, kids went down to the altar and opened their hearts to Jesus, asking Him to be their Lord and Savior and committing their lives to following Jesus.

That first summer, when I was 11, I already knew that Jesus was my Lord and Savior. I grew up in a large Lutheran church and I attended Sunday School and went to church with my family every week. Faith was real in my life, but, at camp that summer, having people give testimonies about their relationship with Jesus and watching people respond to altar calls was something new to me. Honestly, it made me feel invigorated and excited spiritually!

Growing up Lutheran, I never heard anyone talk about things like “Jesus standing at the door of our hearts knocking, waiting to be invited in.” We never had “altar calls” in my home church. I believed that the people in my church were faithful, I really don’t doubt that for one minute, but they weren’t very demonstrative or outwardly expressive about their faith.

There were no **“Amens or Alleluias”** shouted out in worship and there were certainly no invitations to **publicly raise your hand to indicate that you wanted to invite Jesus into your heart!**

So, there I was at camp one night, weaving **my way** down to the altar, singing **“I have decided to follow Jesus.”** I knelt down before a camp counselor who prayed with me the **“sinner’s prayer.”**

A “sinner’s prayer” is simply a prayer of repentance. You acknowledge that you are a sinner and that your sin has separated you from God and from God’s will for your life. You repent and ask for forgiveness. You ask Jesus to come into your heart and you promise to follow him every day. It was very moving for me to do this along with so many others who had come to kneel at the altar, but I was actually familiar with this kind of prayer because, in our Lutheran tradition, we confessed our sins every Sunday at the beginning of our worship service, especially on Ash Weds.

You might say, in our Lutheran “lingo,” that going down for that altar call when I was 11 and praying that “sinner’s prayer” was really my first “confirmation.” In that time and in that place, I **publicly** acknowledged the need for Christ in my life and I **publicly confirmed** that Jesus was my Lord and Savior and that I wanted to follow Him wherever he would lead me. As I look back over my life, I note this experience at camp as one of my **“mountain-top” faith experiences.**

What about you? What are some of those mountaintop experiences in your own faith journey? Do you remember a place or a time, an experience, where Jesus was so real to you and you wanted to give your life to him and follow him every day of your life?

As people of faith, we have these *“mountain-top” faith experiences* in our lives where we are touched, moved, inspired, renewed and transformed by God’s presence. These unique “encounters” with God recharge our spiritual batteries and equip us to **“deny ourselves and pick up our cross and follow Jesus.”**

Having these highly charged spiritual experiences invigorate our faith and our commitment to Jesus but, after a while, the “glory” often seems to fade and we find ourselves standing in “real life.” At least, that’s what we like to call it. Our daily grind. I’m sure you know what I mean.

School, work, taking care of children, taking care of elderly parents, dealing with people in all the areas of our lives, busy schedules filled with so many things to do... in the midst of all this “reality” that glow and enthusiasm that we had for our Lord Jesus begins to fade. Sometimes we even doubt if He *is* the Lord and Savior, not only of our own lives, but, of the whole world.

I think that, for many, this “faith crises” has compounded this past year as we have dealt with a world-wide pandemic and isolation, with the bitter and ugly political atmosphere of our country and with the blatant racism that has risen to the surface all around the world.

As people who choose faith to lead and guide us, we find that we mess up, we fail in our conviction to follow Jesus and the result is a brokenness that permeates our lives. We see it fleshed out in our relationships with others and in our relationship with God. Sin is constantly trying to rule us and ruin our focus to live as God’s baptized people. You know, this isn’t a new problem. Since the beginning of time, people have encountered the living God and they have been enthusiastic about living as God’s people. “Yes, we will do it!” they declared. And yet, time and again, we see them blow it as they sin and fall away from their covenant with God.

Thank God for the good news that God doesn’t give up on us! Time and again, God promises to forgive us as we ask for forgiveness and promise to follow Jesus faithfully.

Today, you and I are invited to commit to this journey of faith once again. Jesus invites us to pick up our cross and to follow him. We look to Jesus as an example of perseverance as he endured the suffering and death upon the cross. Jesus will help us in our own faith journey. When we grow weary or fainthearted, he promises to lift us up “on eagle’s wings.”

Jesus invites you to “deny yourself, pick up your cross and to follow him.” What will you do with this invitation today? What cross will you willingly pick up to follow Jesus? It’s important to recognize that the cross we choose to pick up to follow Jesus is voluntary and moved by conviction. It isn’t an inconvenience or a burden that we grudgingly bear but rather it is an action, a choice that we make that re-centers our entire focus in life. We choose to avert our “navel gazing” and re-focus upon the will of God. We deny a path that is centered on our own self-interest and choose instead a path of righteousness and mercy, modeling our words, our thoughts our actions after Jesus, who chose not to “be served” but “to serve” the world.

This choice that we make to follow Jesus is a choice that will inform every decision that we make and everything that we do in the here and now. Don’t mistake faith for some “other-worldly” “pie in the sky” “someday in heaven” reality. As we pray for “God’s will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven” we understand that God’s kingdom breaks into our present, earthy reality at every moment. Faith shapes the nitty gritty reality of every day. What we choose to read. What we choose to watch. How we choose to look at and judge others. How we choose to eat or drink and how we share resources. Faith shapes how we value relationships. How we spend our money. What we teach our children. How we live behind closed doors and how we face the world.

Choosing the cross comes at a cost. If we choose to call Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, our Savior, then our actions will reflect this decision. We cannot pay only lip-service to a life of faith. We can’t go to church on Sunday and then live a different kind of life the other six days.

One author who helped shape my own theology is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I read his book, “The Cost of Discipleship” in a Theology Class in my first year of college. It

was the heaviest book about faith that I had ever read. Truthfully, I had to read and reread many of its pages to understand what he was talking about. But, for me it was revolutionary and it helped define faith as something that I commit to each and every day, with everything that I am. I'm in this relationship with Jesus 100%!

Bonhoeffer talks about God's grace as being a "costly grace" because it cost Jesus his life. He says we often make this costly grace cheap because we want the perks of grace without our own costly investment.

Listen to what he wrote: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him."

When Mark wrote his gospel it was around 60 AD and Christians at that time knew about the "cost of discipleship." During this time Christians were being persecuted and killed because of their faith. Christians were called subversives by the State because they wouldn't confess that Caesar was god. The first creed of the early church was "Jesus is Lord." Before converting to Christianity, men and women had to "count the cost." If they were going to confess that Jesus was the "Christ" they knew that it might mean facing violent repercussions. And yet, we know that at this time in history, the Christian church grew abundantly as more and more people decided to follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior. To this day I remember a powerful quote by a 2nd century theologian by the name of Tertullian that declares, "the seedbed of the church was the blood of the martyrs."

Throughout history and, even today in 2021, people have chosen to pick up the cross even when it has meant persecution, imprisonment, isolation and even death. They chose to follow Jesus because his way of life brings redemption, meaning and purpose into their lives. They have chosen to follow Jesus because God's Kingdom and God's values are more important to them than anything else the world might offer or teach.

In our bible study this past Weds. we talked about how Christians here in North America have never really had to "count the cost" for our faith. None of us have had to face persecution or death because we claimed to follow Jesus. We also acknowledged that North American Christianity has been diluted as the "gospel of prosperity" has been preached and followed instead of Jesus' gospel that calls us to die to the self.

We see the prostitution of the cross lifted up in painful historical images like burning crosses in the yards of Black neighbors and crosses lifted up like swords in the midst of violent crowds storming the Capital.

This is a defamation of the cross. When the cross is used like this we cheapen the costly, precious value of the cross. The cross was the place where Jesus paid the extreme price for the sins of the world. The cross was the place where The Great Exchange took place. Jesus willingly took the burden of your sins, of my sins, the sins of the world, and exchanged them so that we might have the gift of new life instead of the death we deserve. The cross is the bridge that reunites us with God our Creator and it is the bridge that carries us into community with those around us.

This new life brings power and purpose and meaning into our lives and it is worth everything. We must recognize that without this cross in our lives, we are empty and without clarity of vision and mission.

Today, Jesus invites you and me to pick up our cross and follow him?

As we sing our hymn of the day, I invite you to let the words of this song be your own reaffirmation of faith. Wherever you are at in this faith journey, whether in a stage of great or little faith, know that Jesus loves you and invites you to follow

him. Jesus asks you to trust that God has a plan and a purpose for your life. As you confess Jesus to be the Christ, invite him to redeem your life. Ask Jesus to help you pick up your cross and to follow him, one step at a time, one day at a time, with no turning back.