

September 23, 2018 • Baptism • Blessing Our Crucifers and Acolytes

“The Sign of the Cross” Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Mark 8:27-30, 34-36

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

This is a momentous day for little Cavan Curtis Rold, for his parents Dane and Sarah, for his big brother, Dominic, and all his family and friends gathered to celebrate his baptism. It’s a fun day of special clothes, laughter, good food, laughter, and lots of photos. We delight to welcome Cavan officially into the church family, into the Body of Christ, a new brother in faith, though of course we first welcomed him long before he was even born. We have carried him in our hearts as we awaited his birth, as we saw and held him for the first time, as we have already been delighting in his growth. Today, in the sacrament of baptism, Cavan takes a special place reserved just for him in this great circle of God’s everlasting love.

All this is symbolized in baptism, one of the most ancient practices of the Christian church. In the Creation and in every birth, every new creation, water is the source of life and the wellspring of our joy and hope. For Cavan, this is the beginning of his walk with Christ, carrying now the cross on his forehead and in his heart. Beloved child of God, he is embraced in this family, his church congregation, and in the family of God’s love that spans all time and space.

It’s that sign of the cross, and all that that means, that we consider today as we hear again familiar words of Jesus: “if anyone would be my follower,” Jesus said, “let them take up their cross and follow me.”

Actually, these are pretty hard words to hear, aren’t they? They set a high bar. They make it clear that the stakes involved in this journey with cross as a follower of Christ will impact our lives in ways we can barely imagine. They’re not the kind of words that fit easily with the joy and celebration of this day. We know for sure that baby Cavan has no idea what his parents are getting him into this morning. Yet, somehow, we are all in this together, this shared commitment to lead a life bigger than oneself, life fulfilled as God intends. When we heed Jesus’ advice to Peter to set our mind not on human things but on divine things, we’re already beginning to a life of prayer and discernment, a life of worship and service, a life lived not for ourselves alone but with and for all God’s children, seeking God’s kingdom of righteousness and peace.

You can never really tell in advance just where the cross will take you once you pick it up. In the book we’ll be discussing in our Book Study today, Father Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, the largest gang-intervention program in the world, writes that God’s love draws us into a kind of radical “kinship” with one another. No more us and them, insiders/out-lyers, up and down, worthy and not. It’s an expansive compassion that re-draws all the lines and in so doing, makes new life possible for one and all.

Maybe baptism should come with a note of caution. Something like those pages of warnings that come with medications: If you experience doubt, fear, ostracism for your values...if you become unclear as to what path to take...if you find yourself losing focus drifting away...if your heart grows heavy with the pain and suffering of the world...see your pastor immediately. For a life as Christ’s follower will ask much of us. It won’t always be easy or popular. It is a lifelong walk with Christ that, over time, takes us deeper and deeper into the heart of love, should we dare to go where Christ Jesus leads.

So, you see, as we baptize baby Cavan this morning, it’s a good day for each of us to ask ourselves: what does it mean to me to take up the cross of Christ? What does it mean to put it in the center of my heart? How does it become my compass and a signpost at every step of my walk on this earth?

For as one wise person said: “Putting on Christ is the easy part, but never taking him off...that’s a challenge!”

Martin Luther, the great reformer of the church, had a couple very doable suggestions for us. He himself made sure every morning to make the sign of the cross on his forehead as a way of reminding himself of his baptism. And he suggested that we make every act of washing and bathing an occasion to remember our baptism and give thanks. Or, as many of you do, we can keep a small cross in our bag or pocket. I have a beautiful wooden cross made for me by a church member. It’s in my purse and I have a way of finding it often in moments when I most need to remember, to take a few calming breaths and re-center myself in the life-giving love of Christ.

In a couple weeks, around the date of St. Francis Day, Oct. 4th, we’ll be out in the courtyard to celebrate the annual Blessing of the Animals. It’s one of the most fun days of whole year to be sure. So come, bring your pets, or photos of dear ones no longer with us or of those for whom riding in a car to get here is just too much.

We do this around this time of year, remembering Francis of Assisi as a lover of animals. He was really quite an interesting character. He lived in the thirteenth century, but he certainly didn’t start out as any kind of saint. He was a wealthy adventurer, wayward son, rebel, soldier, who heard a call from Christ on the cross. And from that day forward, Francis became a new man. He took up his cross and became a devoted follower. Turning his back on wealth and privilege, he adopted the ways of a lay hermit. He became an itinerant preacher of peace, defender of the poor, mystic, environmentalist before his time and friend of animals.

Francis created his own way of taking up his cross. He wore a simple tunic and drew a cross drawn on the back with a jagged piece of limestone or chalk. He signed letters with a cross and marked each monastic cell with the same. He frequently prayed kneeling, arms outstretched, consecrating himself and offering himself to the service of God. From the moment he heard Christ calling him by name, he took up his cross to never again lay it down. He was a devoted follower and disciple of Christ.

This morning, we also celebrate some devoted disciples of Christ who serve among us each time we gather for worship—our crucifers and acolytes. Our acolytes and crucifers play a vital role in our worship service each Sunday. Their ministry is a gift to us all. Each Sunday, their roles in worship remind us to take up our cross as followers of Christ Jesus.

Crucifers—that very word means “cross-bearer”—carry in the processional cross, focusing our worship on the presence and power of our risen Lord. These youth literally take up the cross to put it front and center each time we gather to worship. This is who we are, who we strive to be. Followers of Christ, young and old and in between, each seeking to follow faithfully, each seeking, in our own life, to put on the cross of Christ.

The acolyte ministry really originated in ancient times, for light and fire have long symbolized the presence of God. Our acolytes light the altar candles, reminding us that the light of Christ is here and that God, whom we have come to worship and praise, is indeed present here among us. They carry in the Bible and place it on the lectern. And from that place, the Word of God will be read to us and for us, opening to us words of life. They assist with the offering, as each week offer our gifts and ever more grateful hearts. In these ways, our children and youth minister to us all.

We are grateful to them, and to their families, for accepting the responsibility of these important ministries of church.

As we blessed them, we said: “in a world of change and uncertainty, you call from among us crucifers and acolytes to lead your people in following the cross of Christ and to light their way.” There’s no way to know in advance where the Way of Christ will lead.

A widely-quoted African proverb says that “it takes a whole village to raise a child.” It takes grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, neighbors, teachers. It takes playmates, friends, and teammates. It takes a whole loving network of people to bring up a child full of strength, knowledge, and love.

We can say that it takes a whole church to raise a Christian, to show and teach us what it means to put Christ on and how to work through all the times that come in this life when we’re tempted to turn away. Because, carrying the cross through this life can sometimes put us in very uncomfortable places. There are times when we wonder if it’s worth it. Times when other paths seem easier and more fulfilling.

We carry the cross in a world in which accepted wisdom is so frequently upside down. We’re the ones who speak of peace and forgiveness, of no life being more valuable or more important than any other, of new chances always being available. We’re the ones who speak of housing the homeless and rebuilding devastated cities. And, carrying our cross, we not only talk about it, we throw ourselves into that work with passion and conviction. We’re the ones who generously share what we have and pray that we ourselves will be changed by so doing. We’re the ones who pray unceasingly. We’re the ones who reach out to make the enemy into a friend and who insist that there’s always room at the table for one more.

You know, there’s one more thing that our acolytes and crucifers do to help us remember all this each time worship is about to come to a close. When they extinguish the altar candles and recess out with the pastors and worship leaders, all of us led by the crucifer carrying the cross aloft, they are reminding us that we take the light and scatter it about into the world. They remind us that as we leave, carrying our cross, God goes with us and we are filled with the courage that renews our hope. They remind us that though we scatter, we are never alone.

Together, let us strive to set our hearts and minds on divine things, remember our calling and our cross, surrounded by this great company of follow travelers, sharing in the life of the One we follow, and finding there true life.

AMEN

Notes;

Benjamin J. Dueholm. *Sacred Signposts: Words, Water, and Other Acts of Resistance*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018.

Gregory Boyle. *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017.

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