

Stayin Alive

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 4, 2012 as B-lent02-12

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Back in the mid-1970s, when I was in college, I had what was the standard church outfit at the time. These days, polyester leisure suits have become a veritable icon of the 70s, but mine was not the proverbial lime green, no sir. It was *sky* blue – with navy counterstitching! I wore it with buckled, white shoes, a two-inch wide white belt with two rows of brass-grommetted holes, and a satiny polyester shirt in red, white and blue – with scenes appropriate to our nation's Bicentennial. Now, in case some of you may get it into your mind to encourage Jenny to dig through the Martindale archives, I remain deeply glad that, in spite of such digging, to date, no photograph of me wearing this outfit has turned up. Just the *memory* of it is enough to scare small children of *this* millennium, but at the time, I was just “stayin’ alive.”

But why did I dredge up that memory in the first place... Oh, yes... back in the heady 70s those of us that counted ourselves as members of the movement called the Jesus People often completed our Sunday sartorial splendor with crosses, generally the larger, the better. My own ensemble included a three inch cross of wood, hung around my neck on a leather cord and adorned with that Ichthus fish symbol thingy.

Hey, it was better than wearing a bunch of gold chain, *alá* Mr. T (for those of you who know who that is), and it served as a sure and certain sign that I was heading somewhere more wholesome than the disco – or the bowling alley. But even back then I sometimes wondered, is that what Jesus had in mind when he said that we need to deny ourselves? Is that what he meant when he said, “If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me?”

Through the centuries, the cross has always been a very special symbol for most Christians. At it's simplest it's just a vertical line with a horizontal one crossing it. Through the ages, that simple emblem has come to be seen as a symbol for healing, as a sign of peace, as a rallying point for people of faith. But over the centuries, the Cross has also adorned the shields and tunics of soldiers as they rode into battle. And it has been used to concentrate wealth and power in a few not-so-clean hands. And it has been used to legitimize the subjugation of individual human beings and whole nations. The cross was often the first thing native peoples saw as their homes became someone else's land. And the cross was often the last thing that pagans in the 4th century, Muslims in the 10th, and “heretics” in the 16th saw before they were dispatched from this world into the next. Is that what Jesus meant when he said that we should take up our cross and follow him?

In the decades since the admittedly garish days of the 1970s, the Cross has continued to be an omnipresent cultural and fashion phenomenon. Pick up any magazine today and you will no doubt see the cross accessorizing the young and the beautiful modeling the latest in high fashion. Movie stars and mavens of high finance dangle the cross from their necks or their ears. For many Christians, of course, the Cross is *more* than a fashion accessory – it is a reminder each time they look at it on the wall, or pin it on their jacket, or place it around their neck. It is a reminder, to themselves and to others, of who they are and, more importantly, *whose* they are. But does it bother anyone else to see a musician or an actor or some someone of dubious celebrity, who's lifestyle and message are anything *but* Christian wearing a cross necklace, or a cross earring, or a cross tattoo? Is that what Jesus meant when he said that we should take up our cross and follow him?

Every year, usually during Lent or Holy Week, there's at least one magazine photo or webpage or YouTube clip of some guy walking through some street somewhere carrying a large cross on his back. A couple of years back, I saw a news piece featuring a guy making some sort of cross-country trek dragging a cross, though he had installed a small wheel at the base to make it a bit easier. (Maybe the Romans should have thought of that.) All this is meant as pious reflection, and I have no doubt at all about the

sincerity and devotion of those taking on such tasks. But is any of it what Jesus meant when he said that we should take up our cross and follow him?

In the Church, we use the cross in all sorts of ways. Crosses of wood and crosses of metal are sprinkled throughout our worship spaces. [Processing into the church as our service begins and again as we process to the door at the end, it is the cross that is carried high before us.] Some of us reverence the cross at the altar when we enter or when we leave or when it passes, and we teach our children to do the same. Some of us make the sign of the cross on their own chests as a sign of personal piety and worship. Is even *this* what Jesus meant when he said that we should take up our cross if we would follow him?

You see, the problem is that when we hear that phrase, “If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me,” we do not see the cross in the same way as the crowd heard it that day. Colored with the blazing light of the Resurrection, we hold the cross as a symbol of hope, a symbol of victory, a symbol of *life*. But in the world of Jesus and his disciples, the world into which Jesus spoke the words of this morning’s Gospel lesson, the cross meant something else indeed. In their world, the cross was not a symbol of hope, but a symbol of anguish and despair. The cross was not a symbol of victory, but a symbol of tyranny and defeat. The cross was not a symbol of life, but a symbol of torture and *death*. When Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me,” he was saying, “Come with me . . . and die.” *Now* who’s ready to take up the cross and follow?

You see, real crosses are not made of wood or metal, they are made of flesh and blood. In turning to the crowds that had begun to follow him, Jesus told them as he tells *us*, that the cross of discipleship is costly indeed. The cross of discipleship is living day by day a life of faithful obedience to Christ, regardless of cost, regardless of loss. The cross of some lives is intricately worked, heavy with gold, and crusted with precious stones. The cross of some lives is knarled and twisted and blood stained. The cross of some lives is simple and plain and seldom even noticed. But the cross of *every* life lived for Christ bears witness to Christ’s *own* redeeming love in and for a world that is utterly *lost* without him. The Cross of Christ stands at the center of all that we have, all that we do, all that we are. By that Cross we are cleansed from the stain of sin. With that Cross we are sealed in baptism as Christ’s own forever. In that Cross we are transformed into children of God – and disciples of Jesus Christ.

We do not carry that Cross in order to persecute or exclude. We do not lift that Cross to glorify ourselves. Rather, we lift the Cross as a symbol that though the grace of God is free, it is certainly *not* cheap. We carry the Cross as a reminder that the cost of our redemption was high indeed, and that following the Christ who bore his cross for us – is just as costly. We proclaim the Cross as an emblem of Christ’s love for all of us, and for each of us. In the words of the old hymn’s glorious refrain, let us, “Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, ‘til all the world adore his sacred name!”