

Ebenezer Lutheran Church
August 31, 2008
Matthew 16:21-28 Title: Diet and Exercise
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solli gloria dei

A few years ago,

I went on a Parish visit of a man who had just suffered a heart attack.

Doctors did a quadruple bypass, two or more blockages at 90% or above,

And though home, the man was still in a lot of pain.

We talked about how things were going,

What the doctor had said,

About the need for exercise, walking around the farm every day, the doctor said,

To which the man pointed to his favorite Lazy Boy chair and said this was the place for him.

And somehow we got talking about food.

The wife of the man piped up and said that probably what her husband liked least about the heart attack was the reality that his diet would have to change.

For as long as he could remember, he had had two sausage and gravy biscuits everyday with a couple of eggs fried up in butter,

And the doctor had said that diet was one factor in his heart problems,

So there was a fundamental need to change diet in order to stay healthy.

No more sausage and gravy biscuits and butter fried eggs –

fruit, skim milk, non-buttered toast, black coffee no sugar was suggested instead.

It lasted two weeks.

Then, still in pain from the surgery which cut the ribs apart and stretched them so that four bypasses might repair a heart blocked by poor diet and lack of exercise,

The man was back to a “real” breakfast – biscuits, gravy, butter, eggs, sausage.

And mornings and afternoons enjoying his favorite rocker –

I've worked long enough, he said.

He had a second, massive heart attack eight months later, and died soon after.

When you hear today's gospel lesson,

No doubt one part that jumps right out at you is Jesus telling his disciples to take up their cross and follow him.

It's one of the more famous, and probably difficult things Jesus says to his disciples.

Most often, when I've heard conversation about taking up one's cross,

It has to do with crisis, or bearing a terrible burden.

Someone with a painful, lingering illness, or a caregiver watching the painful decline of a loved one;

Someone who has lost a child, or someone with a family member whose ruinous behavior has the family staying up long nights, wondering where they are, or visiting jail cells.

Someone who has seen a hurricane or flood take all they've worked for...

These kind of things seem to be where we place the emphasis on bearing one's cross.

And today's gospel with its emphasis on bearing the cross can be an amazing comfort for anyone dealing with catastrophic circumstances.

But if you look at what Jesus says,

He tells his disciples, *if any want to become my followers...*

It's not about the crises which can envelope one's life,

It's about the daily walk that often occupies far more of our daily life.

Really it's about all of life.

If any want to become my followers...

Jesus is talking about a way of being that is different from the world's way of being,

And he's talking about it not at a time of crisis,

But really in the midst of conversation about daily life.

A daily life that's going to be different from the world's way of being.

A daily life that's probably going to look different because we, like Peter,

Are used to setting our mind on human things.

Look at the beginning of today's gospel.

Peter has just declared Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Now, if you take the Democratic Convention of this week,

And I expect the Republican Convention to be no different,

There's a roar of expectation when the nominee is declared.
And there are promises that things are going to be better and more prosperous in our country,
And the claims from the nominee are that he's going to be tough on our enemies.
And the conclusion of almost every speech I've heard thus far:
And may God bless you and God bless the United States of America!
God is the stamp on whatever it is that the candidate says is going to make things better.
There may be some tough times along the way,
But we're going to come out the other end able to live out life the way we want things to be.

But Jesus surprises the disciples and especially Peter, riding on the good news of the nomination of their candidate, their Messiah.

Jesus' acceptance speech goes like this:

The Son of the Living God must suffer, die and be raised.

God forbid! That party platform will never fly!

But Jesus says to Peter,

Get behind me Satan, you're like something to trip over, you're setting your mind on human things, not divine things.

Peter is called Satan –

Too often, we blow up the meanings of words like Satan, evil, and other words,
So that they refer to catastrophe, crisis or behavior that is so beyond daily life that we don't think of daily living when we hear them.

So that Satanic statements are about unspeakable things like genocide or abuse of children, or murder and rape,

When Jesus refers to Peter as Satan for wanting easy blessing, and the status quo –
Because suffering, dying and rising from the dead is not easy.

It means something ends, something else begins, and a willingness to struggle, indeed suffer in midst of change as we trust in God's way.

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 will find it.

That, my friends is a different way.

Tell me, outside of the congregation, how many times you have been invited to lose the direction and control of your daily life for the sake of Jesus.

Right!

Or take a look at some of the things in today's second lesson that Paul describes as a life that follows Jesus.

Blessing those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them;

Make friends with the nobodies; don't be the great somebody.¹

Live in harmony with one another;

Don't repay evil for evil,

Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for God's wrath.

Feed your enemies and give them something to drink,

Overcome evil with good.

In this political season, I'm not sure we'll hear much of this.

And yet we cannot shy away from the differences between even the best of human ideas and the ideas of God for daily life.

Jesus asks: *What will it profit you to gain the whole world, but forfeit your life? What will you give for your life?*

I think about the man who underwent quadruple bypass surgery in order to gain back a measure of health,

But was unable, or unwilling to connect this massive act of surgery and healing to daily things like eating and exercise,

And the call to suffer – what else would you call the conversion and change of something deeply held – even if that's biscuits and gravy -- die to the old, and rise up to the new.

¹ The Message translation of Romans 12:16b.

One thing I have preached on in the past when it has come to today's gospel is the suffering of fellow Christians around the world in terrible ways of persecution, And I think the stories of the martyrs and disciples past and present who suffered the loss of their jobs, their families, their lives can be poignant and powerful examples of faith. And yet it strikes me today in this land of the free and home of the brave that the most difficult places of conversion and suffering for the sake of faith are not the massive heart surgeries of our lives so to speak, and the pain of recovery from the crises and sometimes unspeakable hurts of life, But the most difficult conversions and places of suffering are the little deaths, and the small resurrections that occur as we grow in the knowledge and practice of daily life that is different, and change, because we're washed in the baptism of God's grace, and following Jesus. The most difficult conversions and places of suffering are in the change of diet, if you will, and the exercise of faith, when we'd rather sit in the Lazy Boy of spiritual contentment, and declare we've done our share.

Because if you take up your cross and follow Jesus,
By the ways of this world, you will lose your life.
If you bless those who persecute you, or make friends with the nobodies,
Feed your enemies,
Don't repay evil, take thought for what is noble in the sight of everyone,
And so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all,
You're going to be out of step, and perhaps be left behind,
And likely experience a measure of suffering.
But you'll see Jesus and his kingdom here and now.
At least that's what Jesus says.

Through Baptism and the work of God's Spirit,
The heart surgery is done.
It's the diet and the exercise that lies in front of us,
And out that door. Amen.