

Discover Augustana Sunday  
Mark 8:27-38  
Pentecost 15 B  
September 13, 2009

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You will receive this morning a booklet written by about all of us. Mary Ann Shippey organized and edited it. Lyn Goodrum and others printed and assembled it. This booklet details some of what God is up to in and through this congregation. Through it you will discover much of what Augustana is. More significantly, it may point you to discover what God is up to with you.

You will notice much here that are the trappings of any institution, but I hope you will discover more than that. You will see much here that looks outward to help, assist, and invite the neighbor, but I hope you will discover more than that. You will find much that will support personal piety in the form of prayer, devotions, Bible reading, but I hope you will discover more than that. You will see in here much that teaches about our raising of our children, but I hope you will discover much more than that. You will find much here about tradition, but I hope you'll find more than that. You will notice our partnerships with Augustana Arts, and the Augustana Early Learning Center, but I hope you will discover more than that. You will find here much that supports moral development, but I hope you'll discover more than that. You will find much in here that supports and nourishes friendships, but I hope you'll discover so much more than that.

Yes, this catalog of our ministries is the shape of our life together. But the shape of our life together points not to itself but sometimes rather awkwardly to something else. All of this points to Christ. All this specifically points to Christ on the cross. If you stay in the vicinity of all these things and more, you will – so the hope goes – end up at the foot of Jesus' cross. Eventually, you will discover the cross of Christ, and in that discover again freshly what God is up to with you.

The cross is no symbol. It is no shorthand to a hidden meaning. The cross is certainly no icon, no piece of jewelry. Kissing the cross probably won't help you make the free throw. The cross is the end of God at our hands. And in that end, from that cross, God has something to say to you.

What is said here isn't discovered from the inside of you, from that oh-so-fashionable curse of subjectivity. What is learned here isn't discovered in creation. What is said here isn't discovered God's majesty or from heaven. What God has to say comes from Jesus' cross.<sup>1</sup> From the cross at its ugliest and most offensive, from there God speaks to you.

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<sup>1</sup> e.g., from without, *extra nos*.

Jesus died for you. This is a pretty simple thing to say. But this has to be said bluntly. Often the temptation is to think that on the cross something else was going on, something more meaningful, more profoundly religious. We look at Jesus' death on the cross and puzzle about it. We wonder about some deep and eternal meanings that could be there.<sup>2</sup>

But it is a simple message. From the cross God says to you, "Jesus died for you, and now you are forgiven." That is a promise, a promise from God. You are forgiven from the cross of Jesus.

I suppose God could have chosen about any other place from which to make this announcement, but God didn't. God could have located this message in some profound philosophy or in some great music, but God didn't. God sent Jesus instead. From the very start of Jesus' career he had come to forgive. And everyone knows you can't run a world on forgiveness. So they killed him for it. He died for the right to say it. "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do." And it is from the cross that God promises that you are forgiven.<sup>3</sup> Now you can be here in a new way and enjoy it.<sup>4</sup> How shall we keep that promise alive in your life and mine?

Christians aren't another specie of human who have some sort of magic by which they avoid the sorrows and hardships – the finitude – of life.<sup>5</sup> Our route is not "up and out" of this life as Peter would have had it, but "down and into" this life as Jesus predicted and then lived it. Jesus says we can't leave the suffering out. We can't leave our finitude out. We can't leave death out. Christianity is no solution to this world, no escape from it. Christianity is a deep dive into the world.

And any deep dive into the world will involve suffering. There is some suffering in the world that can be solved or tempered. On that you and I have our marching orders. But some suffering cannot be solved or taken away. Some suffering is the human condition.

So that is why "taking up one's cross" is not an action of will, something you decide to do some Thursday afternoon. "Taking up one's cross" is not the bearing with the normal annoyances of life, such as bearing up under a chronic condition. Nor is "taking up one's cross" tolerating the setbacks of life.

"Taking up one's cross" means that some suffering can't be avoided, or solved, or resolved. Some suffering has to do with our being creatures, and not creators. "Taking up one's cross" is trusting in the promises of God while in the dark. "Taking up one's cross" is to trust deeply in God's "yes" in the midst of the world's "no." "Taking up one's cross is to live knowing our

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<sup>2</sup> This paragraph from Gerhard O. Forde, "Jesus Died For You," *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 220

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph, again Forde, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. by Jeffrey F. Cayzer (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2006), p. 267.

<sup>5</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p/ 39.

finitude in melancholy . . . , and yet trusting that God's promise has grasped and holds you."<sup>6</sup> "Taking up one's cross" means that when some problem seems irresolvable, you can give thanks, for now you understand the nature of the problem. "Taking up one's cross" is to trust God's promise even now that you understand the nature of the problem.<sup>7</sup>

This kind of trust will not endure easily. This kind of trust in the dark, when everything else says "no," will need powerful encouragement. That's where a congregation comes in. Some have discovered that encouragement at Augustana and thousands of sister Christian congregations all over the world.

Christian congregations like Augustana are God's collection of baptized people who through Word and Sacrament and in its life together encourage each other and the world in the promises God has made. A congregation is God's encouragement to you: you can trust God's promise. That is what all *this* is about. All these various ministries, activities, associations of people, meetings, practices, meals, well, in all of *this* is about encouraging trust in God's promise, right in the middle of the night. Trusting those promises when there is no evidence for that trust frees us to accept the finitude of our lives. That's what you discover at Augustana.

Joe Sittler, writing near the end of his life, saw in age an awkward problem. That awkwardness is really with us every day of our lives. Aging just brings it into higher relief.

The fact that human life has a limit. . . [is] an awkward fact, for our entire . . . system is geared towards. . . problem solving techniques and devices. Popular culture is invited to assume that knowledge, resolution, time, and an adequate allocation of funds can solve all problems . . . The older I get, the fewer things I understand.

A famous literary figure near the end of his life was given a great literary award. "He was asked to make a brief statement. He said, 'I'm an old man; it's a strange world. I don't understand a damn thing.'"<sup>8</sup> There, right there, is the cross. A congregation of the cross discovers not a community of glory and victory, the sort of thing Peter wanted. A congregation of the cross discovers, through everything it does and is, that encouraging each other to cling to the promises of God from Jesus' cross, especially when not another thing is known, is the what God is up to in all this.

Today is Discover Augustana Sunday. Scores of ministries begin again in this season. Discover all of the opportunities here to join with others in the kinds of things that congregations do. Discover also at Augustana, and with other entire sister congregations around the world, that

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<sup>6</sup> Bayer, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> See this essay for an excellent description of how this is lived out "in our time." Andrew Root, "A Theology of the Cross and Ministry in Our Time: How Do You Call a Thing What It Is When You Don't know What the Thing Is?," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Volume 48, Number 2 (Summer, 2009), 187-93.

<sup>8</sup> Both quotations from Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations*, ed. by Linda-Marie Dellof (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1984), p. 121.

others gather with you at the cross, around the awkward facts of our lives, take up our crosses, and cling to the promises of God. Amen.