

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father
and from our Lord and Saviors Jesus Christ... Amen**

There are 16 chapters in Mark, and in chapters 8, 9, and 10, the pace slows from one in which almost everything happens immediately, to one in which Jesus is s-p-e-a-k-i-n-g v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y. The pace is considerably slower.

My Seminary professor called this section of Mark “the hinge,” suggesting that perhaps some of the most important material is located right here... And isn’t this lesson incredible!

We’ve got Jesus talking very personally about his identity. Peter makes that incredible confession, that Jesus is the messiah. We have Jesus openly telling everyone that all the good religious people will hate him, in fact dislike him so much they will orchestrate his death. And Jesus also says that he will rise on the third day.

Then we have Jesus saying some very profound things, but they’re very difficult to understand. What I’d like to do this morning is spend some time reflecting on this picking up a cross and following Jesus, and this whole idea of losing your life to save it. A lot of paradox! What does this mean?

I’ll be honest, I can only speak from my own experiences and stories, and I trust you also have some thoughts and ideas about this scripture lesson. The older I get the more aware I become that I need to speak with greater humility, and we’ll have to trust the Holy Spirit to bring us to some life-giving meaning...

(put on farm jacket)

Today I’m wearing the robe of a sacred vocation; the profession of farming. What can be more sacred than feeding the world?

I really love this old jacket, it has all the battle scars of good farm work, a little grease, a little dirt, a little hay chaff still in the pockets, I have a big red spot here, it could be blood from delivering a lamb, or it might be the filling from a raspberry jelly roll. I can’t remember anymore.

Most every vocation has its own particular robe. Business people wear suits, nurses wear scrubs, firemen wear turn outs, policemen wear uniforms, some professions wear Dickies, some wear kakis and some are lucky enough to wear jeans.

In the kingdom of God, the robe doesn't matter-- every vocation is a sacred calling, a calling to love and serve our neighbor and all vocations are equally important and essential. In God's eyes, my dirty old jacket is a holy vestment.

One of the gifts of Lutheran theology to the wider theological conversation is what we broadly call a theology of the cross. It's what Jesus calls us to do in our Gospel lesson. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." A theology of the cross is all about loving the neighbor, bearing a cross for our neighbor.

This theology of the cross is deeply embedded in Luther's writing. And it has been tremendously influential; in fact, it is directly responsible for why the word "vocation" refers to a job. You see the word "vocation" comes from the Latin word "vocare" which simply means calling. In a very real way each and every one of us are called to the jobs that we do, and in God's eyes every honorable work is a sacred calling.

In our Lutheran identity, it's not only in our jobs where we fulfill our calling; we also fulfill our calling in the various roles that we occupy. For instance, as a parent, or grand-parent, as husband or wife, as member of the church, as a Sunday school teacher or greeter. Every time we reach out in love, we extend God's hand in service.

When we see the jobs and roles that we do as a sacred calling, then what we do with our time becomes a matter of spiritual significance, isn't it? Acknowledging that God calls us into existence, the fundamental question then becomes "why?"

Why did God put me here? What is my purpose? What kind of job should I have? What does God want me to accomplish? And especially in retirement when we're all redefining what to do with our time. It seems to me that these questions are fundamental to our faith journey, and I suspect we wrestle with these questions all the time.

A theology of the cross understands that we receive by giving away. In a sense it's a paradox... In our gospel lesson, Jesus makes a simple statement of fact, "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." This may seem like a contradiction-- how can we save our life by giving it away?

A theology of the cross is all about the transformation of suffering. Suffering is not something we like to do, or even something we like to talk about. And I have to confess, talking about suffering is a little like listening to

finger nails on a chalk board. But suffering is a fact of life. We all suffer different things and in different ways. How we suffer can make all the difference in the world; it is the difference between making it meaningful, or frankly, despairing.

Quick Story... Many of you know Brad Deitner used to be a shepherd and a professional sheep shearer. In fact, Brad was my mentor, he is the guy that got me started in sheep; selling us our first ewe lambs many years ago, patiently answering all my dumb questions, graciously teaching me everything I came to learn. Brad encouraged me to learn how to shear my own sheep, and so I went to the University of Wisconsin extension sheep shearing school.

When Brad was asked to shear larger flocks, he would call and I was happy to tag along... Those larger jobs were absolutely back breaking. On the way to the farm, we would strategize about how much ibuprofen to take, what we might encounter-- wet sheep, dirty sheep... When we got to the farm we would survey the operation, determine where everything would be placed, unload all the equipment and get everything set to go.

The first couple sheep were always trials, we had to make sure the shearing board was level, made sure we had the right lead and tension between the comb and cutter.

It was also a time to make some mental notes about the condition of the sheep. If the sheep are wet it's like shearing a sponge, you get soaked to the skin. And when the sheep are stressed, they have diarrhea, then you can only imagine the mess you have on your hands—literally! There wasn't too much to be done about these things; you just grin and bear it.

After the first few sheep were done and adjustments were made, it was just a matter of gritting your teeth, and taking one sheep at a time. Besides the physical exertion, it took a lot of mental concentration to shear. You were constantly trying to be one step ahead of the sheep, and always trying to pace yourself.

And just when you would be in a groove, the farmer would come over and start making conversation. This was always distracting for me; sometimes I would cut the sheep, or worse, cut myself... There was often blood flowing somewhere. In fact, Brad always had a suture kit available, and believe me we used it!

When we were done for the day, from head to toe, we were covered in sweat, urine, manure, blood and oil... We were filthy... Exhausted we would reload all the equipment, and just before we would leave we would look over to the paddock where the sheep were held. And just appreciate all the freshly shorn sheep.

And in those moments, it felt like we had really accomplished something! We had finished a job, we had sacrificed, and we had brought it to full completion...

Those moments were always very meaningful for me and quite simply-- they always made me feel incredible. There was meaning in the suffering we endured. We didn't suffer for nothing, we suffered for something. In a very real way, we were God's hands, and participating in God's good creation.

As we work in our jobs and fulfill the calling of our roles, as we bear a cross to love our neighbor, we do not suffer for nothing; we suffer for things that are incredibly important and meaningful. We suffer for each other, for our families, for our faith, for our hope and for our love.

Bearing a cross for one another brings into existence things that did not previously exist. In this cross to love our neighbor we are God's hands, bringing into existence God's on-going creation, we are co-creators with God.

The good news today is that suffering never has the last word. God is continually creating the world we live in. God is transforming us in love and meaning, through all that we do to bear our cross. We've all seen it, we've all experienced it, and in our hearts, we know it's true... Indeed, it's in the losing of our life, that we find it...

And believe me this is a miracle, this is the kind of miracle God gives us all the time... We know that neither death, nor life, nor anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God, and this is what gives us new and eternal life.

And this is not some hocus pocus, bye and bye magical Christianity, as I said last week, this is incarnational, this is as real as you and me...

I wore this dirty old jacket many times out in the barn delivering lambs. This jacket saw a lot of new creation. I wonder-- in the sacred robes that you wear, in the roles that God has called you into, how are you co-creating with God? How are you bringing God's purposes, God's new creation into existence? How do you pick up the cross and follow Jesus?

Amen.