

Sermon – 2nd Lent
Mark 8:27-38
February 25, 2018

“Faith No One Can Deny”

James Foley was a freelance photographer and journalist who was kidnapped in Syria in late 2012 and killed by his captors in 2014. Many jobs that entail risk - Mr. Foley's death was likely caused because of his faith. He was a Roman Catholic Christian, and at a mass for him following his death, Bishop Peter Libasci, who knew Mr. Foley, said James saw his work not only as his means of making a living, but as his vocation, his calling from God. James Foley's heart for social justice came from the inspiration he received from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

James Foley felt it was his calling to describe human suffering, call the world's attention to it that it might be alleviated, and in the process expose the perpetrators of suffering. In Syria, one might have thought that in 2012, as now, he'd earn the wrath of the government, and he may have. But he died at the hands of a group opposed to the Syrian government, who came to call themselves the “*Islamic State of Iraq and Syria*” – “ISIS”, a group who has been hard on anyone who opposes their ideology but particularly those who claim Jesus as Lord. James Foley may well of died because of his religion as much as his reporting.

Yet he was doing what he felt called to do. In our lesson today from Mark, Jesus said plainly to his disciples – perturbed because Jesus told them he was about to suffer for doing what God called him to do – “*if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will find it.*” I hope that James Foley remembered these words before he died, and it would please me none too much if he were speaking them audibly to his captors as he did.

But back to the words of Bishop Libasci for a minute - what is this thing called “vocation?” It's sometimes conflated to mean “*occupation or labor*”, and though it doesn't necessarily bring suffering it is in the Lutheran tradition very much a place where crosses are borne. I offer the example of James Foley as a compelling example of following one's calling and embracing one's vocation – but not as a *greater* example of faithful service than any man or woman who does what they do because they are inspired and guided by the Lord to do it. Vocation is broad term, not narrowly confined to someone who gives or risks their life. Of course Jesus knew he would die, but he did not nor does not *expect* that of anyone of us, for as the Apostle Paul says “*the death he died he died once for all to sin – but the life he lived he lived to God.*”

Jesus *did* use the cross to illustrate for Peter and the others his particular summons to faithful service. But I want us to focus on Jesus' deliberate use to two distinct terms in this lesson – life and soul. Jesus is making it clear that he will save our souls. That was his vocation, and his alone. What then can or must you give in exchange for your soul? The answer is of course – nothing – and you don't have to, because Jesus did.

But you can gain life by living it the way God intends you to - that is what “*your cross*” is. You may have at times, you may even today be asking yourself - what is it that God wants me to do? Nothing of what I say now should be understood to mean “*don’t stretch yourself, don’t challenge yourself, or don’t pursue some dream.*” But, doing what God intends you to do with your life means taking into account two very important “vocational ”ideas – “*position and passion.*”

Martin Luther said “*to leave one’s own position or calling and attach oneself to alien undertakings surely amounts to walking on one’s ears and turning everything upside down.*” Luther believed that God’s people are all guided by the same Spirit, yet all do different external works – as Paul in I Corinthians 12, says “*the body has many parts but one Spirit.*” Luther used the phrase “*the cross of vocation*” to mean that they are ordained by God to benefit not him who fulfils the vocation...but those people who rely on us to carry them out well.

Under the cross are included what Luther called “*the most trivial of difficulties – marriage, caring for children* (which he wistfully noted interferes with sleep and all manner of adult pleasure), *in government, in the ministry, in daily labor, and in generally suffering the irritants of the shabby and proud person!* He said “*You ask where suffering is to be found...Run through your stations in life, from the lowest to the highest, and you’ll find what you are looking for.*”

So what about you? What is your current “position?” Think about that for a moment. Your age may influence your answer – but it does not preclude you from having something you can do. I remember so very well visiting with a member of my former congregation and she was unable to get out of bed much at all. She said to me “*pastor why am I still here – about the only thing I can do is lie here and pray.*” And I said to her “*oh, is that all!*” What a depiction of taking up one’s cross and following she was.

Where has life or circumstance or need of someone else placed you? Don’t assume that such a place, however it may currently strike you is not God’s will for you. But go ahead and also ask yourself, what is your passion? What is that thing which you “*can’t not do or aspire to?*” That is your calling too, and if you can do it – do it. If not, or if not now, wait for it. The waiting is then your cross. Regardless, as you serve someone in any way out of love for Christ you will assuredly be helping those folks “*know who Jesus is.*” And you’ll be assured of not one but two things. Some folks won’t understand you a bit – how someone could live so selflessly that is. And you’ll have an eternity to enjoy every last minute of what you did – well or otherwise - for Jesus. You have his word on it. Just ask James Foley. AMEN

