

28 August 2005  
Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“A Cruciform Life”

Text: Matthew 16:21-26

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you want to know the definition of a word, you go to the dictionary and look it up. If you have a medical problem, you go to the doctor and get it diagnosed. If you need legal advice, you go to a lawyer for a consultation. And if you want to know what it means to be a Christian – a believer *in* and follower *of* Jesus, the Christ – it is the words of Jesus that we heard this morning that give a pretty good description of what that means: ***If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.***

Now that is *not* a verse most people in our world would point to to define a Christian. Current cultural and political debates are about posting *the Ten Commandments* in schools and public buildings, and those who object do so because they think that will make us a Christian nation. But the Ten Commandments are not what Christianity is about. Following the Ten Commandments does not make you a Christian. . . . Others today will tell you that being a Christian means following the “*Golden Rule*”: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But that isn’t much better. In fact, that is just a summary and condensation of the second table of the Ten Commandments. No, following the Golden Rule does not make you a Christian. In fact, this is the kind of “false religion” that we prayed *against* in the Collect for this day, when we prayed that God would increase in us true religion.

No, there is only one thing that makes Christ Christ, and a Christian a Christian – and that is the cross. As we heard today, Jesus told His disciples ***that He must go to Jerusalem . . . and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*** He must. That’s a strong word. It means there was no other way. *Take away the cross and you take away Christ.* But that’s not all Jesus said. He then also applied those words **to us**. To those who would be Christians. To anyone who would be a follower of Jesus, the cross must be there too. Take away the cross and you take away Christians, Christianity, the Church, and the only way Christians are made. That is why Jesus calls Peter ***Satan*** when he objects to the cross. For by saving Jesus from the cross, Peter would not be *saving* Jesus, but would in fact be destroying Him and everything He came to do for us. And the same is true if we try to save ourselves from the cross – we will in fact not be *saving* ourselves, but destroying ourselves. ***For what will***

*it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?*

So we must know what it means, therefore, to **take up your cross**. That too is a very misunderstood thing. For the first thing that comes to many people's minds is *suffering* – that Jesus wants us to suffer. But while the cross *involves* suffering, that is not what the cross is about. For if you lived in First Century, if you saw someone carrying their cross, it didn't mean *just* that that person was going to suffer. It meant that, but more. That person was going to *die*. And soon. There was only one future, one outcome, for that person. The cross was *an execution*.

Now if we were just discussing crosses in general, that would be it. The cross means death. But we're not just talking about any cross here, but *one cross* in particular – the cross which Jesus carried; the cross on which He hung. And so there's one more step in understanding it rightly – which Jesus said, and which we confessed in the Creed – and that is **life**. Life *after* death. Resurrection from the dead. This too is included in what Jesus said must happen. He *must* go, He *must* suffer, He *must* die . . . but He also *must* rise. That is what we mean when we talk of Jesus' cross, and *our* cross – **the whole package** . . . and the *goal* of the whole package, which is life. Eternal, everlasting, unending life. The life that was lost in the Garden with sin, and which Jesus came to restore. And the *means* of restoration was the tree of the cross – or as we say in the liturgy as we approach Holy Week: *On the tree of the cross you gave salvation to mankind that, where death arose, there life also might rise again and that he who by a tree once overcame likewise by a tree might be overcome*.

And so no cross, no Christ. No cross, no Christians. Both then, and still today. ***If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*** But now the question is: *how do we do that?*

Well (as I said before), we don't do it just by suffering; we don't do it just by dying, or laying down our lives for others – we do it **by living the cross**. Now that sounds like an oxymoron, or a paradox, and it *would be* if we were talking about just any cross! But remember: the goal of Jesus' cross is not death, but life. And so His cross in our lives means not just death, but life. It means living the cross. It means that the cross *defines* who you are. It means that the cross *shapes* who you are. It means that the cross is not just an historical event that happened some 2000 years ago, but is an ongoing reality in your life, and *that without the cross you would not be who you are*.

**Is that true for you?** If you took the cross and Church and Christianity out of your life, would you be different? Or would you be pretty much the same person, only without anything to do on Sunday mornings? That's an important question, and it is at the heart of our readings today. For it was true of Jesus. The cross was not just something that happened to Jesus at the end of the story of His life, but was there from beginning to end.

The cross defined and shaped who He was and what He did. It was there in everything. ***His mind was set on the things of God, not of man.*** And so He was often in conflict with those who thought like men. But He couldn't do otherwise. For He was formed and informed not by this world, but by the cross. Or in other words, ***His life was a cruciform life.***

And that's how the Christian's life is as well: ***a cruciform life.*** A life formed and informed by the cross. But the cross not just as history, but as an ongoing reality in your life. And so as cruciform Christians, you are defined not so much by your *birth* certificate as by your *baptismal* certificate. You know that it is better to be on your knees before your Saviour than standing before kings and politicians. The voice and praise of men is insignificant compared to the comfort and voice of your Good Shepherd. The cruciform Christian sees blessings in *all* things, not just in "good" things. Enemies are not opponents but opportunities for prayer. Families are not defined by homes, but churches. The cruciform Christian knows that the body and blood you here receive is a richer feast than the finest of restaurants. And you know that the most important three little words you could ever utter are not *I love you*, but *I forgive you*. For that is the bottom line. That is what the life of the cross is all about. And that is why Jesus said He must rise. His resurrection wasn't a necessity simply because He was more powerful than death, or because He defeated Satan and the grave – although that's all true! No, He had to rise because in Him, sin was no more. It was swallowed up by Jesus on the cross. And if there is no sin, there is no death. And if there is no death, then Jesus must rise to life. And as those forgiven their sins by Him, by grace through faith, *so must we*. At the end is not death, but life. And so while the things of this world will all come to an end – birth certificates, kings, politicians, men, enemies, homes, food – the cruciform life, His life, will never end.

And as we receive that new life and forgiveness here in baptism, absolution, and Supper, we have already begun to live this new life. For in these is His cross applied to our lives. In these we live the cruciform life, as these gifts – the fruits of our Saviour's cross – form and inform and shape our daily lives.

And so when Jesus says to ***deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me*** – that is not three different steps, but one step. It is to live the cruciform life. It is to live in the freedom of forgiveness – received and given. It is to live by faith, in a reality greater than what can be seen. It is to trust that the way of our Saviour is the way of life. . . . It doesn't mean that Christians can't have any fun and have to live hard lives of suffering and deprive ourselves of all pleasures! No! But it does keep things in perspective – in *God's* perspective. And it enables us to live our lives here with purpose and meaning – not just randomly chasing after things that are here one day and gone the next, but living, as St. Paul said, as ***living sacrifices***. That's another oxymoron, or paradox . . . *apart from Christ*. For to the world, to sacrifice your life means to lose it! But not for the Christian! For the Christian who loses his or her life in Christ, is actually living! . . . and is living *most fully* the life that will never

be taken away.

For that is what God wants most of all. He does not want us to suffer. He wants us to live. The way of the world, the way of Satan and sin, is death. And we're living in a culture of death. People die, friendships die, families die, relationships die. But into the midst of all this death comes the Son of God and His cross of life. And He takes all this death – our death – and gives us life. He does not count our sins against us, but takes them Himself. And when Peter objects, saying ***this shall never happen to you!*** Jesus says, “No, it must, so *that it may never happen to you!*”

And that's it! That's the cruciform life. The life in Christ and His cross, forgiven and now free to live! Now, how do you want to live?

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.