

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

*My Lutheran Pastor's Desk Diary* tells me that spring arrives in the world of nature on Friday, March 20, and many of us are feeling as though it cannot come soon enough. But in the world of the church, we are already there – today is the Second Sunday in Lent.

The word “Lent” comes from the Middle English word, *lente*, a word which means “spring,” so Lent is, for us, the springtime of our souls. It is the time in which the darkness of winter slowly gives way to light, and new life pushes out of the cold, hard earth.

What is surprising about Lent is that it is focused on the cross – an instrument of torture and death. There doesn't seem to be much light or life in a device that was used to kill Jesus, the Son of God. Instead, it seems to be as dark and cold as a winter night.

And yet, Jesus calls to us through the Gospel of Mark, saying, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Those who want to follow Jesus are challenged to pick up their cross and walk with it, not throw it down and run away from it.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it,” predicts Jesus, “and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” In a complete reversal of expectations, the cross becomes an instrument of salvation and new life, rather than of torture and death. Perhaps there is some light and life in the cross after all.

When we dig into the Bible, we find that the cross is not a one-dimensional instrument of torture and death. It has at least four sides to it, all of which move us out of darkness and into light. The cross is a window, a mirror, a solution and a summons.

These four sides were suggested by Rev. William Willimon, a former Methodist bishop, speaking at a pastors' conference. Willimon said that he likes talking about the cross with Christians who take sin seriously and believe that Christ suffered on the cross to bring us forgiveness and new life with God.

The first side of the cross is a window – a window into the character of God. The cross shows us that God loves us so much that he wants to save us from our sins, and God does this by taking something evil – the crucifixion of Jesus – and turning it into something beautiful. Our God wants to be in relationship with us, and he uses the cross of Christ to make this connection.

In Mark, Jesus teaches his disciples that he must “undergo great suffering” and be rejected by religious leaders before he dies and rises again. Peter criticizes Jesus for talking like this, which leads Jesus to rebuke Peter with the words “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Although Peter cannot see it, the cross is a divine thing. It's not a human thing. Jesus knows that he must approach the cross if he is going to advance the mission of God.

When we look at the cross, we discover just how far God will go to make a connection with us. God's Son Jesus suffers for sins, even though he has not committed any sins himself. He is a righteous person who sacrifices himself for unrighteous people. He loses his life not for any personal power or glory, but so that we will be brought closer to God.

So if you wonder how far God will go to be in relationship with you, the answer is really quite simple: all the way to the cross. The cross is a window into the loving character of God.

But the cross is also a mirror – it is a mirror of our sinful human nature.

The second side of the cross reflects who we are. God came to us with open-handed love, and we nailed his Son Jesus to the cross. Even worse than all the crusades and terrorist attacks and genocides in human history is this horrible decision of the elders, chief priests, scribes and people to reject and kill the Son of God.

This is not a pretty picture – it’s a nightmare. The cross reflects the fact that we live perversion-driven lives. Fortunately, God knows this, and he is willing to reach out to sinful people like us. The cross serves not only as a mirror of our sinful human nature, but as a reminder that God sent Jesus not to condemn the world, but to save it.

“For God so loved the world,” says Jesus in the Gospel of John, “that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

This brings us to the third side of the cross: it is a solution – a solution to sin. At the clergy conference, William Willimon said that “the cross is like a magnet, picking up the refuse of the world.” Throughout his life, Jesus got in trouble for the company he kept, including with tax collectors and prostitutes. Then, when he was nailed to the cross, he died for the sinners of the world.

While it is hard to explain exactly how the cross draws us to God, when we look at the cross, we get a strong sense that God is at work. When Jesus invites his followers to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow,” he is asking them to walk the very same path that he himself will walk.

When he predicts that they will be saved by losing their lives for his sake, he is offering them a route to forgiveness of sin and everlasting life. The cross is like a powerful magnet, drawing people closer to God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian pastor killed by the Nazis in the Second World War, said that when “Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”\*

This death can be actual martyrdom, as the first disciples and Bonhoeffer experienced. It can be the death of leaving secure surroundings and going out into the world. Or it can be the death of giving away your possessions and following Jesus – as the rich young man was challenged to do.

In any case, said Bonhoeffer, “if we lose our lives in his service and carry his cross, we shall find our lives again in the fellowship of the cross of Christ.”\* The cross is a solution to sin and a path to new life.

The final side of the cross is a summons – a summons to follow Jesus in our daily lives. The invitation that Jesus offered in Mark is the same one he offers us today: If you want to become my disciple, take up your cross and follow me.

Deny yourself. Be willing to lose your life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel. And if you do this, promises Jesus, you will not actually lose your life – you will save it.

“For what will it profit them,” asks Jesus in Mark, “to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” The answer: absolutely nothing. There is no true profit in gaining supreme political power. There is no genuine profit in gaining extraordinary business success. And there is no profit in gaining financial security, especially if one uses corrupt or illegal means in doing so.

Instead, Jesus calls us to approach the cross, take it up, and follow him. When we do this, we become the kind of people who find greatness in service. We discover satisfaction in sacrifice. We come to see that it is better to give than to receive, and that our deepest happiness comes from setting our minds not on human things but on divine things.

As we move from winter into springtime, darkness will be replaced by light and we’ll travel ever closer to the cross.

Instead of seeing the cross only as an instrument of death, let's notice that it is a window – a window into the character of God. It is also a mirror – a mirror of our sinful human nature. It is a solution – a solution to sin. And it is a summons – a summons to follow Jesus in our daily lives.

When it comes to the cross, four sides are always better than one. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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\*These quotes are from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, The Cost of Discipleship (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, [1937], 1963), pp. 99, 101.