

Text: I Peter 4:12-16, 19 (Pentecost 17, Series B [Supplemental], September 16, 2018)

Theme: Always Count on the Cross

Virtue (basic truth): No such thing as “easy Christianity;” thankfully, there’s always the cross!

Malady (our problem): Sinners-saints despair in the difficulty and pain of carrying a cross.

Telic Note (goal): By means of this sermon, the Spirit of God pulls our hearts to the Savior’s cross for us and, by it, strengthens us to carry our cross following him.

Propositional Statement (aim): Some make life look easy, but the maxim is still true: life ain’t easy. It’s important we understand that in terms of Christianity, too. How blessed we are to know the cross of Christ; how blessed and difficult and worth it it is to follow him.

Specific Law in Text: *“those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good”* (I Peter 4:19).

Specific Gospel in Text: *“if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear his name”* (I Peter 4:16).

Doctrinal Thought: The Christian cross is everything we endure for the sake of the gospel.

Sanctification Thought: *“Day by day, your mercies, Lord, attend me, bringing comfort to my anxious soul. Day by day, the blessings, Lord, you send me draw me nearer to my heav’nly goal. Love divine, beyond all mortal measure, brings to naught the burdens of my quest; Savior, lead me to the home I treasure, where, at last, I’ll find eternal rest”* (Day by Day, hymnal: Christian Worship Supplement, 765).

I Peter 4:12-16, 19

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

¹⁹ So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

To those who struggled on account of the cross, Peter brought the changeless truth. He brings the same to us: “*Grace and peace be yours in abundance*” (I Peter 1:2). Alleluia and Amen!

Some people have a knack that makes life look easy; and we instantly know the type.

- the teacher who hums through lesson plans and classroom discipline;
- the students who waltz to the honor roll with minimal stress;
- the athletes with *off-the-chart* stats who don’t break a sweat;
- the engineers who are wired for vision and integration;
- the physically well whose health doesn’t struggle with so much as a hiccup.

Won’t exhaust the list of life’s smooth-sailors; neither will we begrudge gifts and grace God gives others. But acknowledge this: those who struggle experience giant frustration when others make life look easy; it’s hard when our struggle is real but their activity is sweat-less. With me?

Reason I start this sermon on that concept is because we never want to connect that “*life is easy*” impression to the Savior who lived and died for us. Yes, Jesus is both God and God’s Son. Yes, the Christ “*has done everything well*” (Mark 7:37). Yes, our Savior is the ascended Lord before whom every knee will bow (Philippians 2). Yes, he is the eternal Sovereign in sovereign control (Colossians 1). But none of those *stats* equate to a sweat-less salvation-win. None of those absolute truths should ever eclipse the reality that his objective was met with severe suffering and rejection. Put it this way: never was Jesus’ glory disconnected from the cross.

We just read and responded to a Gospel lesson where Jesus that emphatically clear (Mark 8:27-35); in fact, even the conversation connected to the cross is hard. So, when Jesus addresses the need and necessity of his cross, it’s no wonder Peter pulls him aside to rebuke him strongly. “*A cross? Nope! Suffering? Don’t speak of it! Rejection? No way! Misery? Never!*” And we agree: if anyone can avoid that cross and get around it, it has to be Jesus. He is the Christ (Mark 8:29)! If for no other reason and no one else, Christianity should at least be easy for the Christ!

To which the Savior Son of God sharply replies to Peter and for all to hear: “*Get behind me, Satan . . . You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men*” (Mark 8:33). The road is not about earthly glory; it is not about earthly ease. In fact, in the objective of sinners’ salvation, the misery and theology of the cross was 100% necessary, 100% unavoidable.

Friends, let’s not flatter ourselves to think we’re somehow unconnected from that. In case we’re prone to think our salvation was an “easy thing” of the Eternal Transcendent, let me spell it out: *your* sin brought *his* suffering. Planned. Period. You did that. Your rebellion won his rejection. Your unkindness killed him. Your denial brought his death. Your cursing weighed his cross. Your eye-rolls effected his heart-stopping. He was pinned for your loss of patience; he groaned

over your grumbling. Hard. Wretched. Miserable! But, maybe what's most stunning of all: he knew it would be and he knew that it had to be, but he *always counted on the cross*. Why?

Because the wretched cross of God's beautiful Son was the difficult means needed and necessary to forgive your sin – and every sin of the entire world. Hard as it was – even for the Son of God – he *counted the cross* to save you, to save you from the consequence of your sin and to save you for eternity with him. And that cross, his cross, is still the pillar to which he brings our heavy hearts always back; it's still the changeless promise he lays on our soul when guilts annoy, when the Accuser assaults and when temptations tear: always, Christians, count on the cross! And, there, see the full heart of God on full display for . . . you!

Jesus' cross is the simple truth of the gospel – it's where God's love and justice collide, his mercy for sinners and his punishment against sin meet. It's marvelous! But that truth to hearts and lives is never unapplied in hearts and lives. Nor does that truth ever imply that life will be easy on this side of eternity. In fact, it always emphasizes the opposite. And Jesus keeps us aware of that, too. He tells us to *always count on the cross* because, in a sin-consequenced world, we will have our problems and fears, we will be plagued with pains and persecutions. But Jesus' cross still stands to remind us that he has overcome the world and he has not forgotten us. His cross still stands to refresh in that truth and to encourage us with it – to his eternal praise!

Of all the disciples to remind Christians of that, Peter does. The student who rebuked the Rabbi. The disciple who denied the Divine. The forgetter who fled the Forgiver. The one who sat in guilt for three days until the angel told the women, "he's alive; go tell his disciples and Peter" (Mark 16:7)! The one whom the Redeemer restored to "feed his sheep" (John 21). The one who knew how heavy the cost of following Christ is; the one who was killed because he confessed Christ. Of all the disciples to encourage Christians to *always count on the cross* for your joy and for your strength and for your confidence – and, for sure, they all did, it's Peter who tells us:

"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.

¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name . . . ¹⁹ So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (I Peter 4:12-16, 19).

Only and always by the Spirit's work on our hearts, do any of us get to acknowledge the power of Christ's cross in our hearts, in our lives, in our days, and in our eternities. Only and always by the Spirit's work on our hearts, do any of us get to *count on the cross* even as we endure for it –

when temptations rise and guilt boils, when words cut and the world mocks. Even when the confession is costly and the pain unexpected, the Spirit teaches to, *always count on the cross*.

We need to be clear on that concept. There are three ways to understand cross:

- First and foremost, Jesus' cross – what he suffered and where he won our salvation;
- On a broad spectrum, it's any difficulty in life – pain, sickness, problems;
- In a narrow sense, it's what we suffer in our lives for the sake of the Gospel on our hearts

It's that final one that's so costly for us. And here's why: far more costly than 2 ½ minutes of a creed in church, the cross is a confession the world mocks. Far more weighty than 1 hour a week, the cross brings sneers and jeers from the world around us. Far removed from a life of ease and a sweat-less spirituality, the message of the cross embattles sin to make us participators in the suffering of Christ (I Peter 4:13). Never an excuse to conceal the cross, and it's never a merit badge for our salvation. It's never an opportunity to continue in the sins pinned to it, but there's also never a reason to be ashamed of even when trials and tribulations come.

When we get to see our own crosses in that light, we also get to realize that those difficulties taste and prove the power of God (LSB Footnote). Those crosses despairs of self to delight in our Savior; despise sin in thanks for the Savior. And that hard, every day that's hard! I'm not saying that it's not; but neither is the Son of God who with us through every cross.

And when the Spirit allows us to see things in that grace-filled light, the stunning happens: our crosses, those things which we bear for the sake of the gospel, draw us closer to Jesus' cross, and draw praise from our hearts for it. And, when that happens, the Christ is confessed clearly in a world that mumbles and mutters about him, sin is put away, temptations are weakened, and even persecutions refocus our attention on him. Christians, when that happens, when the Spirit of God allows us to *always count on the cross*, he reminds us that our forgiveness is sure; he strengthens us to serve him, he captures our hearts with his peace and emboldens us to confess him.

Friends, there is a reality we don't always see: life is hard. Teachers prep; students study; athletes sweat; engineers analyze; even the physically strong get sick. No surprise. That's true in regards to our faith, too – no surprise! But in magnificent love, even then, the Spirit of God pulls us to the Savior's cross and helps each of us carry our own in the shadow and shade of knowing that we can *always count on the cross* to lead us home.

Alleluia and Amen!