

“Our Great Heritage: The Theology of the Cross”

Expectations versus reality. Perhaps you have had the opportunity, like I have, to see pictures or videos regarding the theme expectations versus reality. As I have seen several, I have to assume that they are fairly prevalent in certain online spaces and internet sites, and perhaps other places as well. For example, one picture, presenting the expectation, could show a box full of impressively decorated cupcakes. With a few colors of icing and a few common treats, the cupcakes have been transformed into a child's favorite cartoon character, and they look amazing. The reality picture shows what happens when I or another similarly skilled individual tries to replicate those cupcakes. The frosting colors are sort of there, but the whole batch is little more than a big mess. The expectation was cupcakes that no child could resist, and the reality was cupcakes that nobody wanted.

Another example would be a video of someone sprinting on a treadmill. That's the expectation: speed, an amazing fast workout. The reality video shows the budding athlete tripping and falling, sliding to the end of the treadmill belt, and being dumped in a heap on the floor. And it's not just in pictures and on videos where expectations don't always meet up with reality. Perhaps you can relate to this situation or one like it: you have in mind to host an incredible meal, like a Thanksgiving feast. Tender, juicy turkey, perfectly seasoned gravy and dressing, and incredible sides will be devoured by your happy and thankful family and houseguests. But the reality doesn't work out that way. The turkey is dry, the sides are barely edible, half of the food is burned because a timer didn't go off on time, and no one seems happy or thankful. Whether it is as pronounced as these examples or not, you know that things don't always turn out the way that we want them to or the way that we expect them to.

In our sermon text today, Mark records an incident from the experience of the disciples where things did not turn out the way that they expected. As was often the case, Jesus and his disciples had been traveling from place to place. They had seen several of his miracles, and they had confessed their confidence that he was the Christ. And then he began to teach them in a way that did not meet with their expectations. He started telling them about the suffering that he would endure and the death that he would die. That's not what they wanted in a Messiah! That's not what they wanted for their friend and mentor and teacher! So Peter spoke up. “That's not what will happen.” “Don't be so negative about things.” “You have big and important work to do.” Mark doesn't tell us the precise wording of Peter's rebuke, but we can imagine.

But this incident quickly became a lesson in expectations versus reality. The expectation of Peter and the disciples was that Jesus would continue to be with them. He would be their teacher and mentor and friend. He would be their Messiah, their Christ, and they perhaps thought that meant that he would finally push out the Romans or that they would rule with him in a kingdom of God on earth. But the reality, as he told them, was that he would be rejected and killed, only to rise again.

And Peter no doubt had an expectation when he rebuked Jesus. He perhaps expected that Jesus would appreciate the loving concern and the support. He perhaps thought that Jesus would thank him and praise his words. But the reality hit hard. Jesus called Peter Satan. He ordered him away and refused to acknowledge his ideas.

But that was just an introduction to another expectation versus reality moment. Jesus began to teach the disciples and the others who had gathered exactly what it meant to be his follower, his disciple. Maybe they thought that it was nothing more than walking along with him, answering a few questions here and there, and mostly listening to him teach and preach while watching him perform miracles. The disciples were ready to sign up for that. But there was much more to the reality of being a disciple. The reality is that a disciple takes up his cross and denies himself in order to follow Jesus. The reality is that it is not simple or easy or always pleasant to follow Jesus. It is often hard and painful and heavy. Just as Jesus would be crucified, so also his disciples would have to carry their own figurative crosses. They would have to bear a heavy burden to be and to remain disciples. Peter wrote about this same issue in our Second Lesson (1 Peter 4:12-19) when he spoke about suffering for being a Christian.

Following Christ does mean that our natural, sinful nature needs to be denied. It means that we will be subject to pain and suffering. It means that things won't always or maybe ever live up to our expectations of what it should mean to be a Christian.

We refer to this clear teaching of Jesus as the Theology of the Cross. That same message of suffering and failure to meet expectations is found really throughout the Bible. And it shouldn't surprise you to find out that Martin Luther in his intense study of the Bible, found that very doctrine. In 1518 Luther, whose fame was beginning to grow following the posting of the 95 Theses, was asked to present a doctrinal study, called a disputation. He was a monk at that time, and the whole group of like-minded monks, in this case called the Augustinian monks, gathered together for this occasion in a town called Heidelberg. For this Heidelberg Disputation, Luther prepared a new series of theses, 40 of them in all. Arguably the most famous of them reads this way: "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is" (thesis 21).

We call the false theology that opposes the Theology of the Cross the theology of glory. It looks at the way things are on the outside. It notices things like good works and outward success. It celebrates congregation size and pastoral popularity as the main and most important things. But it doesn't listen carefully to what Jesus really says.

The theology of glory tells us that we don't need to deny our sinful natures. We can enjoy success and perhaps riches and fame and whatever other glory we want and expect right here in this life. But that wasn't the case for Jesus. He didn't rule over the world in an outward way when he came to earth, he suffered. He was betrayed and crucified. And in the same way, his followers can expect not glory, but the cross.

As we discuss these crosses, it is very important for us to distinguish between Jesus' cross and ours. Jesus' cross is the one that forgives our sin. It is the one that gives us a new life. It is the one on which we place our hope and our confidence. But all Christians who share that hope and confidence will also have their own cross or crosses to bear. All of us are called to follow Jesus' example in self-denial and love for others and to suffer the consequences that it will bring.

As we seek to hold on to this aspect of our Lutheran heritage, we would hear in these verses God's call to us: "Take up your cross!" Don't focus on yourself and your expectations. Don't get discouraged by pain and suffering, but know that your Savior went through even more for you. Know that in spite of appearances at times to the contrary, he is in control of your life. Let his words encourage you. Carrying your cross is worth it! Carrying your cross and following Jesus until the end results in eternal salvation. Those who lose their own lives for Jesus and for the gospel gain eternal life. Every cross, even the most burdensome, is worth carrying when we look at it from an eternal perspective.

Carry your cross. Do not seek first to accommodate your own wishes and desires, but look to serve and help others. Don't judge your situation by only what is on the surface or what other people might see. That's the theology of glory at work. Judge it from the perspective that God gives: what is seen is temporary, what is unseen is eternal. The theologian of glory calls good evil and evil good. He focuses on the outward and praises success and wealth and even the good works that people think might bring them closer to God. But they don't. When we seek to preserve and enrich ourselves in this life, we lose the blessings given to us in the cross of Christ.

The theologian of the cross calls things what they are. It may not look like a good thing to have Jesus betrayed and beaten and killed, but the reality is that was the greatest blessing, the greatest good this world has ever seen. It may not look like a good thing when we suffer, when we are ridiculed, when we have to fight against our sinful natures constantly. But God uses these things to focus our attention on him and his Word. He drives us to his assurances in Holy Communion and the announcement of our forgiveness. He strengthens us to each and every day pick up that cross again and carry it one step closer to eternal life in heaven.

Take up your cross, because Jesus promises you: **"Whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."**

The Text: Mark 8:31–38 (NIV)

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”