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Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL

3:25

When Is the Cross?

Luke 9:18-24

A. Jesus died once for our sins.

B. We die daily for His glory.

I would like to begin this sermon with a rather strange, some would say even morbid, thought. What if you knew with absolute certainty of the time, place, and manner of your own death? How would that affect how you live today? If you knew with complete certainty that you would die at a rather old age and in a peaceful manner surrounded by family and friends would you take more risks with your physical well being today? Would you even live more frivolously? Would you ignore warnings and guidance of what you should or should not eat or drink? Would you become careless as to how you would keep safe or even take caution when doing something as simple as crossing a busy street?

The simple fact is that Jesus did know from very early on how, when and in what manner He would die. Several times the Gospels record Jesus telling His followers explicitly that He would be rejected suffer and die by crucifixion. Amazingly however Jesus' whole life was overshadowed by this fact Jesus did not live carelessly but rather very deliberately and carefully all leading up to His death. One would correctly say that everything Jesus did lead up to His self sacrifice on the cross. Just think for a moment about how Jesus lived and acted.

Remember one of the tests that Jesus endured when He was in the desert tempted by the Devil?

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' " Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " (Matthew 3:4-7).

When the crowds became too great and when people would have been happy and satisfied with having Jesus only heal and cure the temporary life this side of heaven Jesus told people NOT to tell others who Jesus was or what He had done. Why? Because Jesus came for a more powerful reason: to die and heal everyone forever. Yes even when Peter confronted Jesus

telling Him that he would not allow Jesus to be rejected and killed what did Jesus say? "Get behind me Satan." (see Matthew 16:23).

The book of Hebrews tells us something utterly amazing about the life of Jesus: **"Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."** (Hebrews 5:8-9). Yes, Jesus as a man grew and learned and became over time the man who would have the strength and the fortitude to be able to pray to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane that if it would be possible for the cup of the cross to pass. When His prayer was answered that there was no other way than to die on the cross for man's salvation Jesus was able to endure that great act. It would be very wrong for us today merely to think of Jesus as only a superman because He is God and so being rejected, being crucified and being forsaken. By His Father as not much more than a show.

"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (verse 22). Today in our Gospel from Luke Jesus tells His followers plainly that He, Jesus would suffer and die. What did Jesus' life in preparation of His death look like? Jesus did not live a life of carelessness, neither did He simply try and live it up and to get as much fun and enjoyment of life before dying for our sins. Rather Jesus lived of a life of deliberate planning and preparation. Jesus often withdrew either by Himself or with His disciples for solitude. We know that Jesus was a man of great personal prayer. Yes, when Jesus found Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before He died this was merely Jesus' lifetime of personal prayer and preparation. His entire lifetime led up to this point. What did Jesus say about prayer? We know that when Jesus taught His followers to pray He taught them the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Give us this day our daily bread." Yes Jesus taught them a daily prayer. This sounds a lot like Jesus' words to us today. **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."** (verse 23).

Jesus lived a specific daily life all leading up to the cross; the followers of Jesus were to receive that one time gift of the cross to have it change every day of their lives. Yes, today Jesus is personally calling you to a daily life lived in His grace. Jesus is specifically calling you to daily die to the world. Such a request cannot be lived out solely in the strength of one's sinful self but must be lived out in the strength of Jesus Who has overcome all things for us.

Jesus uses the qualifying word "daily" in today's gospel for good reason. Unlike Jesus we do not know exactly how many days are ahead of us. How much longer do we have on this earth? Only God knows. It is for this

reason that the apostles stressed the immediacy and urgency of taking hold of Christ today: **“I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.”** (2 Corinthians 6:2). Daily also means necessary and regular. We, out of necessity need Christ and we need Him and His grace and the comfort of His cross daily. If we do not connect to Jesus on a regular consistent basis we are not really following Him are we? Neither are we receiving all that we need for the life God wants us to live in Him.

Yet how often do we not connect with God daily--or even weekly for that matter! The result? We either burn out spiritually or when a trial or temptation comes our way we are untrained or unable to deal with it in a godly Spirit led manner. Over time the less we connect with Jesus on a daily basis the more we connect with the world until we are just like the world.

Just look at the pattern laid down by the Saints of the Old Testament. We just completed a study of Ezra/Nehemiah there during their time of spiritual renewal Ezra the priest read from the book of the law every day. Their renewal was a spiritual renewal.

Something special happens for us each and every day as we connect to God. When we do so we are both reminded that God is really with us in our lives and our minds can be set for the day. For example, if someone is really struggling spiritually with something in their lives it is much harder to fail if that person were to spend some time the first thing they get up in the morning praying to God about their situation and listening to God's promises in the Bible.

Daniel that great prophet in the Old Testament tells us quite plainly that three times a day he prayed to God. (see Daniel 6:10). The psalmists speak of regular daily prayer as well (see Psalm 119). Why did they do this? Was this merely a legalism? No! They did this because daily they needed God's strength. Luther recommends such a life in our Small Catechism when he exhorts people to make the sign of the cross and to pray to God as one of the very first things they do when they get up in the morning.

Think of someone who is skilled at their profession. It really doesn't matter what it is, whether they are a baseball player, a farmer, whatever. Their skill is not something that they just go out and do. Take a professional golfer for example, they don't just wait for a tournament to come up and then take out their gold clubs and go play that day. No. Rather what they do is practice and practice going over the same things the same basic skills over and over and over again. I have read that one of the very hardest workers at the game of golf is Tiger Woods. Years ago one of the greatest hitters in the game of baseball was a man by the name of Ted Williams. I read that Ted Williams a man whose eyesight was so superb that he could actually read the writing on a baseball as it was coming to him each and every day took five hundred swings of his baseball bat. Why? Because when he was in a real

game hitting a baseball and having a perfect baseball swing was the most natural thing in the world for him.

Our spiritual walk with God is not fundamentally different. When Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and to follow Him daily He is calling us to have God and godly things first and foremost in our minds. When we do that we find that God sets the agenda for our daily lives but also when a struggle or conflict or test does arrive we can handle it in a fundamentally different way than if we rarely or ever connected to God through His Word.

Only God knows when we are going to take our last earthly breath. We do not know when or what the next spiritual challenge lays before us. We don't know with certainty when we will encounter the next person whom God has placed in our lives to be the witness of the Gospel in a very personal and powerful way. If we connect to Christ's cross daily the times and manners of any of these situations will not matter because we will be prepared, equipped and able to do what God wants us to. Then doing the right thing will not be difficult or strange or foreign but it will be natural and god pleasing. Then we will not have lost our life but will have found it in Christ. Amen.