

Strength to carry the cross is yours; it comes from the Christ of God. Amen.

"Who do you say I am?" (9:20). Until that question, following Jesus has been kinda fun. He heals the sick. He confounds the Pharisees. He kicks demons around. He raises the dead. He feeds the five thousand. Who wouldn't want to follow Jesus? Crowds flock to him. You would too. So would I.

Why? We love a spectacle, and this Rabbi is spectacular. But Jesus does not love the spectacular. **Jesus was praying in private (9:18).** This Rabbi, who can say and do such spectacular things, avoids the spectacular and prays by himself.

He has a good reason. Consider the question he asks his disciples: **"Who do the crowds say I am?" (9:18).** Jesus doesn't ask this because he is clueless about the crowds' opinion. He asks it to show you **the necessity of the cross – his cross, and your cross.**

The crowds' opinion? **"Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life" (9:19).** Popular opinion says that Jesus is a powerful speaker, like one of the old school prophets.

But that's not right, so Jesus digs deeper: **"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "The Christ of God" (9:20).** Good answer, Peter! Jesus is the Christ.

Christ is a Greek word that means "the Anointed One." This word tells us Jesus' job. Jesus is the specific One, chosen by God, to cover sinners with his perfection and wash their sins away in his blood.

Of course, Peter and the disciples don't understand that job yet. That explains Jesus' bizarre response: **Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone (9:21).** Before the Twelve can proclaim Jesus as the Christ, they need to understand **the necessity of the cross.**

And he said, "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" (9:22).

It sounds so matter of fact, doesn't it? But remember, Jesus is God. He knows every spit, slap, and strike that he will endure. He knows that crucifixion is one of the most painful ways ever invented to kill someone. There isn't a nice, comfy couch waiting for him in Jerusalem; just the cross. And he goes there *gladly* – for you and for me.

So why is this cross, **the cross of Christ**, a necessity? Because it's the key that unlocks heaven! Saint Paul tells the Corinthians: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

When our sin ruined the perfection of his creation, God could have said, "Alright, I'm just going to flex my almighty muscles, and start over with a new creation." But he didn't. Instead, God decided to do something that looks foolish. God hid his saving power in weakness.

His Son, who created heaven and earth, became a baby. The Son of God who never slumbers nor sleeps, slept through a storm on a boat. The One who opens his hands and satisfies the desires of every living thing, was hungry and thirsty. Jesus, who is life, died. Jesus, who fills the highest heavens, was contained in a tomb.

God hid his saving power in weakness, and he still hides that same power in weak looking things. The God who created the world's oceans, hides his forgiveness in a handful of water and a mouthful of words. The God whose body and blood is the most precious of gifts, hides them in the most common of meals. The God who is truth, quietly hides his truth in a simple Book.

Jesus hid his glory on the cross, and the cross is hidden in plain sight in Baptism, Word, and Supper. That's why **Christ's cross is a necessity** – it saves us. We cannot confess who Jesus is without talking about the cross. There is no such thing as a cross-less Christ. But Jesus also promises that there's no such thing as a cross-less Christian.

Listen to Jesus: **Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (9:23).** Be ready to take up your own cross and follow Christ.

Don't expect life to be hunky-dory because you believe in Jesus. The devil won't allow that. "If the world hates you," Jesus once said, "keep in mind that it hated me first" (John 15:18).

This is why you will never be respected by the world for being a Christian. You know the reasons: Belief in the absolute authority of Scripture is stupid; supporting one man one woman marriage is closed-minded; defending the life of the unborn is naïve and sexist.

And you Lutherans, you are the bucktoothed, inbred hillbillies of the Christian Church. You stand too completely on the Word of God! You're cautious about whom you pray with and take Communion with, you think Christians should agree on everything the Bible teaches, you baptize babies, you use liturgies and hymns, your pastors are all men!

But it gets worse. The cross that we carry doesn't just come from the outside; it comes also and especially from the inside. Within each and every Christian lives the sinful nature (Romans 7:18), the part of you that hates the things of God and loves the things of men (Galatians 5:17).

Your sinful nature is why you question God's Word and struggle with its teachings. Your sinful nature is why you keep some sins around like pets and feed them every day. Your sinful nature wants you to be in charge, not God.

The sinful nature is why American Christianity has more to do with the couch than the cross. Couch Christianity is a religion that appeals to the human nature – a Christianity that makes us comfortable. The most popular preachers in America fill stadiums by the thousands and sell books by the millions, all by teaching that if you follow Christ your life can become nothing but sunshine and doughnuts.

"Just believe, really believe, and your troubles will melt away. All your days will be pain free, and you'll be living your best life now, every day a Friday. After all, God loves you. That means he wants you to be happy, right?"

Not really. Jesus will have nothing to do with that, a Christianity of the couch, a feel-good religion that appeals to human desires. This is why Jesus says the cross is self-denial (**9:23**). Self-denial is crucifying your sinful nature and its satanic cravings. That's hard!

So hard, that the obvious solution just jumps out at you: Don't carry the cross. None of this struggle, none of this suffering will happen if you just put down the cross.

That's a seductive line of thought. But Jesus tells you exactly where the crossless life leads: "**For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it**" (**9:24**). The crossless life ends in hell.

When the cross lies at my feet I am not a Christian, I am an unbeliever. When the cross lies at my feet, I save my life in this world, but I lose eternal life in heaven. I go to hell.

Life without the cross is always more attractive than life with the cross. It's just plain easier. But a life without the cross is a life without Christ. No cross, no Christ, no Christian. Just hell.

So why is **your cross** a necessity? Because God uses it. The cross that you carry is a tool in God's hand. God once promised: "I will refine them like silver and test them like gold" (Zechariah 13:9).

God is the refiner. You are God's gold. The way to refine gold is to heat it up and burn off all the impurities. Your cross is the refiner's fire. The hotter it burns, the more valuable you become. The cross that you carry burns away the impurities of your sinful nature. Because suffering sends you back to the font, back to the Word, back to the Lord's Table for proof of his love, for strength to endure.

This is a lesson taught all over the Bible. You heard it two weeks ago on Trinity Sunday: "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

Rejoice in suffering? Yes, it makes me more like Jesus. Be overjoyed by my cross? Yes, because Christ carried his cross. Praise God for my suffering? Yes, because when I suffer, it reminds me of who I am – someone who follows Christ. I am a Christian. You are too. And for us **the cross is a necessity**. Amen.