

# The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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As I walked along rows of display booths at the East 7<sup>th</sup> Street Celebration on Friday evening, a man whom I didn't recognize approached me and gave me a warm greeting. He introduced himself as Rev. Tom Park, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church nearby. He told me he had been in attendance at the recent funeral here at Saint Pascal's for our long-time parishioner Marian Fischer, whose surviving husband is a lifelong Lutheran. And then he smiled and said to me, "You preach just like a Lutheran." I told him I accepted that as high praise.

There was a time in my life when I wouldn't have been certain about what a comment like that would have implied; but I believe I do now. And I remembered that funeral particularly because of the gathering song, to which I made reference in my homily. The song was that old standard, "Lift High the Cross," and at one point during the homily I asked everyone at the funeral to simply stop for a moment in silence and to gaze at that thing (the cross). And that's why I think Pastor Park tagged me as a Lutheran, because if there's anything to which Lutherans are devoted as the center of their faith it's the Cross of Jesus Christ. We Catholics love the cross too, but those guys LOVE the cross...in their theology, in their preaching, in their hymns and songs, in their church buildings—it's everywhere. And for a very good reason—a reason which no Christian of any kind can ever afford to forget, namely, if one is going to commit truly to following after Jesus on the journey to the Kingdom, he or she is going to be led to the cross, just as He was. There is glory and victory in the sign of the cross, but never apart from suffering and death. And if we aren't ready to follow him all the way to this this, then we aren't ready, and we ought to admit that now rather than trying to fool ourselves or anybody else.

A lot of our specifically *Catholic* religious tradition tends to focus on "both-and" rather than "either-or." By that I mean that we talk a lot about a God who is present to us *both* in this life on earth *and* in the life to come; that we can strive for true happiness *both* now *and* in eternity; that we can speak of ourselves and our churches as *both* graced *and* sinful at the same time; that we should acknowledge the goodness of *both* our spirits *and* our bodies. Those are right and true instincts, but a hardened Lutheran of the Reformation will want to take a different relative emphasis, will want to remind us that this world and the next world are truly distinct, that the happiness of heaven often comes with the sacrificing of the pleasures of this Earth, that we must never be content to tolerate sin inside a holy person or church, and that our flesh can often enough prove a hindrance to a full and free spiritual life. Those *also* are right and true instincts. And there's more: an absolute insistence on the cross as the boundary across which we must pass between time and eternity. The cross insists that saying yes to discipleship demands saying no to a number of things that seem appealing or even good in this world, and that putting Jesus in the center of one's life means displacing one's *self* as the center, and that at some point there is an absolute limit to the "both-and" kind of imagination that Catholics are attracted to. That's very Lutheran, and it's absolutely true faith. That's a big part of what the cross means. And that can be sometimes exceedingly difficult and demanding for those who try to be followers of this savior. And that's also why it's rather natural even for a Catholic to preach like a Lutheran at the time of a funeral: Because it is at a moment like that that the absolute limit of whatever joys and hopes and attempts at happiness in this life to which we cling are confronted. We can't remain truly faithful apart from being brought to the threshold, to *this* (the cross), where the option of "both-and" is no longer possible.

In today's gospel of John—as in those of the last four weeks here, Jesus is appealing to a different image—the bread and wine, the flesh and blood of the Lord—but the message is exactly the same. Unless you de-center

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*yourself* and cling to Jesus Christ as your center; unless you are ready to forsake absolutely everything else for that allegiance, then you just can't do it. There can be only one ultimate treasure and value at the center of life, and it's an "either-or" kind of decision we must make: God or me, God or us. We Catholics rightly want to say "both," but a sturdy Lutheran will insist in the end it simply *can't* be both. Unless you eat *my* flesh and drink *my* blood and live according to *my* spirit, you cannot follow. That's the gospel pushed to the limit, and as many as Jesus' disciples said in this reading, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" And they began to leave him, when the inevitability of the cross, the death to one's very self, began to become clear to them. They were troubled by that and rightfully so, because what that de-centering requires of us is something that is impossible without the strength of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

After that funeral for Marian Fisher I had one of those terrible awakenings of a preacher who realizes that he said exactly the wrong thing in his homily, and for a moment I was embarrassed and regretful. Because it dawned on me that at this *one* funeral, the *only* one when I have ever invited the people to stare intently at the cross, the grieving husband who was sitting in a wheelchair right there, front and center, *couldn't* do that because he has recently been made blind by a disease of the eyes. And then I realized, (and I hope this is not just an attempt to excuse myself here) I realized that he was the one who didn't *need* to look at it because he was *bearing* it, at that hour more than ever. That cross was on his sturdy Lutheran shoulders, and he was moving onward with that, with the strength of faith that only God gives and only a true disciple accepts. There's no getting to glory without confronting the cross. There's no true life or hope in us without eating the bread and drinking the cup, without making room for God right in the middle of life, in the place where we would prefer to be ourselves. It's "either-or" here. We don't *have* to make way for God in the center, but the alternative is fairly bleak. We can't save *ourselves* from the threat of death and destruction. We are not, in and of ourselves, stronger than the weight of the cross. But Jesus is. And Jesus living *in us* is. "Lord to whom shall we go? *You* have the words of eternal life. And *only you*. Surely not *we*. So let our taking of the Eucharist be for us the same kind of confrontation as our contemplation of the cross, this glorious, disturbing, consoling, encouraging, convicting, challenging sign. Lift high the cross; the love of Christ proclaim; till all the world adore his sacred name.