



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Edward Stone Gleason tells this story about a man named Sam. [In Carl P. Daw, Jr., ed., "Breaking the Word: Essays on the Liturgical Dimensions of Preaching" (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), pp. 142-43.]

It seems that for more than a decade Sam had operated a successful counseling business in a mid-sized industrial city in the southeast. His contracts were with major corporations which had brought growth and progress to the area. The counseling center offered a variety of services, but most clients wanted help with a drinking problem. The center's contract with each corporation enabled employees to seek help with a guarantee of anonymity. Each employee's problems and progress were treated as completely confidential, and it was well known that client files were for the eyes of the counseling staff only.

One day the executive vice president of the largest firm under contract made an appointment to meet with Sam. To Sam's shock and amazement, this executive demanded to see the files for his employees. Sam told him politely but firmly that this was impossible. The files were completely confidential. The vice president's face became red, and he spoke loudly and harshly to Sam as he repeatedly insisted that the files about his employees be delivered to him immediately. Sam continued to refuse.

Finally, the vice president stood up and moved toward the door. As he touched the doorknob, he turned around, paused, and stared at Sam. "Very well. Since you insist, tomorrow our legal department will contact you to terminate our contract with you immediately. How many of our employees do you suppose have availed themselves of your services? More than a hundred?"

Sam again reminded him that this was confidential information.

“No matter. You won’t be seeing them anymore, unless you give me their files right now, and I mean right now.”

Sam had a vision of his counseling practice collapsing like a building demolished by explosives. He pictured his own personal finances also reduced to rubble. Then he addressed the executive in as measured a voice as he could muster.

“Dick, how many times do I have to tell you? It can’t be done. It just can’t be done. My center’s work with your employees is completely confidential. Cancel the contract if you must, but you’ll never get those files. Never!”

The vice president walked back and took his seat again. “Okay,” he said, in a subdued voice. “If that’s the way it is, then I guess it’s safe to tell you why I came. I have a drinking problem, and I need your help.”

When Sam had uttered the final refusal of the vice president’s demand, he was moving near signing his own death warrant. It was a death that he chose, one that came out of being a true professional and a true Christian. He was giving up his life as he knew it, or so he thought. But he had to trust that God would be with him on the other side of this scenario.

You might say that Sam picked up his cross and followed his beliefs down the road to Calvary. All he could see at that point were the faces of the men and women he had helped confidentially. His integrity was at stake, and he gave up his life for it. Sam’s personal cost could have been very costly. Death of the beliefs he lived by and worked by. But Sam just could not fail to do for Jesus what Jesus had done for him.

Sam followed Jesus’ demands. He picked up the cross and followed. He was willing to give up his life for Jesus’ sake. As our Scripture text would say, “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?”

Folks this is what Jesus asks of us as well. No more and no less than he did for us. Jesus gave up his life on the cross, dying a horrible death so we could have life abundant on earth, forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life that comes at the resurrection, when he overcame death and the grave for us.

Matthew tells us that Peter just could not understand this prediction by Jesus. He did not want to follow a “Suffering servant” to the cross. Yet, this verbal exchange between Peter and Jesus is to teach us that if we are called on, we too may have to lay down our life for our Lord and Savior. We are not to be stumbling blocks to ourselves or to others.

Can you remember a time in your life when you had to make a stand for Jesus? Have you ever had an unforgettable moment of decision, like Sam did in his office? I think that the story of Sam is a perfect example of picking up our cross to follow Jesus. And when we find ourselves in a situation like Sam’s we would pray for God’s amazing grace to lighten the load of carrying the cross. If we trust Jesus, He will make our life less burdensome.

In our world today, I think that there are many circumstances in which we are called to pick up our crosses to follow Jesus. Hopefully, they will not be to death, but even if they

are, we know that Jesus will be right there beside us. There are an awful lot of people in this world that look at Christianity as easy. I believe it is known that good stuff happens to people who say they are Christians. And as Lutherans we are certain that God's grace is a free gift to all who ask for it. You certainly cannot earn it, even though one might say that Sam earned it by refusing to give up the notes on employees. But by standing firm in his commitment to his faith, Sam was showing his resolve and belief in Jesus.

I do hope for most of us that such choices do not come quite as paramount as Sam's. In fact, I think that to choose Jesus comes in little subtle moments most of the time. I don't have a pen in my purse, so I "take" one from the office. I did not study for that math test and so I write a few formulas on my hand. I don't return that extra dollar the check-out lady gave it to me by mistake. I tell someone that I will pray for them and then I forget all about it. There are many challenges in life, and they differ for each one of us. It is not as important what they are but rather how we respond to them.

Sam heard threats from an executive that held his paycheck in his hand. The world calls us to do things that are against the Christian way of life. Where do you hear your invitation to pick up your cross and follow Jesus? Where is Jesus calling you to die so that true life, an abundant new life can be yours?

I hope and pray that verses 24-25 will be something you give thought to this week. "The Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'"

Folks, we have an amazing God who loves us dearly. So set your hearts and minds not on worldly things but rather on the divine things of Christ Jesus. **AMEN**