

Lectionary 23C 2019, Luke 14:25-33, September 9, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA,

Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans grew up in a devoutly Lutheran home in which prayer and church and religious education were a natural part of daily life. By all accounts Sophie was a model student, who loved to draw and paint. At a young age she exhibited a devout Christian faith. She loved to read books on theology and philosophy and developed a strong and passionate belief in the dignity and value of all human life.

Sophie enrolled in the University of Munich, Germany in the spring of 1942 where she majored in biology and philosophy. She, along with her brother and the rest of her family, had long been troubled by the virulent dehumanizing philosophy of the Nazis. Her father was jailed for criticizing Adolph Hitler to a co-worker. Her boyfriend had been drafted into the army where he was sent to the eastern front. He reported to Sophie Nazi crimes of shooting Soviet prisoners into mass graves and the mass killing of Jews. She also began to hear reports of how the Nazis were killing severely handicapped children, claiming these were lives not worth living. As a Christian Sophie understood the lie. For Christians believe every child is a child of God, especially those who are most vulnerable, most weak; and every life is a life worth living. So Sophie, along with her brother and several other students, started a movement they called The White Rose. They began writing and distributing anonymous pamphlets calling on the German people to resist the Nazis. After writing six pamphlets they were turned in by a university janitor who saw them leaving pamphlets in the hallways where students could find them.

Sophie and her brother were arrested and put on trial. They were not allowed to provide a defense for their actions. On February 22, 1943 Sophie Scholl, her brother Hans and several others were found guilty and condemned to death. They were executed by guillotine that same day. Sophie was just 20 years old when she died as a martyr to the Christian faith and the inherent dignity God gives to all human beings.

Sophie Scholl bears witness to the truth of Jesus' words we heard in our gospel this morning. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Jesus' issues a costly call to discipleship. Nothing is allowed to stand in the way of our following him. Not our parents, not our brothers and sisters, our spouse or our children. Not even life itself. All must find their place in relationship to the first priority, the number one priority, Jesus himself. Jesus uses strong language, saying we must "hate" all these. But not hate in the usual way we think it means, as in loathing or thinking it disgusting and intolerable. Rather, "hate" means not getting so attached you become distracted and run the risk of dividing your loyalties. In God's Kingdom only one true loyalty exists. Your faith in Christ.

All other relationships, including those with our family, our possessions, even our country, must take their cues from that first and most important loyalty of all, the one we owe to Jesus our Lord.

Jesus speaks tough words. Difficult words. Words made even more difficult when the choice is as life-demanding as it was during the time of Nazi Germany in the 1940's. The sad truth is for every Sophie Scholl who acted courageously and took up the cross to follow Jesus there were millions of other Christians who would not take up that cross, who loved their own life more than the one who gives life.

I know we do not live in Nazi Germany and we aren't likely, at least in the short term, needing to make the kinds of choices a courageous young woman like Sophie Scholl believed she needed to be made. Still, I truly believe an important aspect of Christian discipleship is to imagine yourself faced with that kind of choice. What would I do if it became apparent to me that following Jesus meant I might have to give up all I cherish and love? Can you picture yourself faced with that choice between bearing witness for the truth of Jesus or choosing to save your own life?

I believe that's what Jesus means when he tells these two little parables about counting the cost before building a tower or considering troop levels before going to war. Jesus says before you undertake the serious commitment of discipleship it's a good idea to figure out if you have what it takes to go the full distance. You might start a project like building a tower and run out of money. Or you go to war and run out troops. Or pick up the cross and can't carry it the whole the way. By imagining yourself in that position before you get there you count the cost ahead of time.

Jesus invites us to pick up our own cross and carry it as a witness to him. Where is the cross located in your life? Where are you asked to choose between the Kingdom of God values of service, love for the weak and vulnerable, and the values of prosperity, popularity, and self-preservation? The story of Sophie Sholl reminds us that sometimes that choice may involve social and political action when even a nation can lose its way and needs to be confronted with the truth.

To answer the call to follow Jesus and pick up your own cross can indeed be costly. But costly only in terms by which the kingdoms of this world measures cost. Family, possessions, even life itself may seem to others like a price too high to pay. We follow one, however, who knew full well the cost of obedient faithfulness. As Jesus listened to the will of his Father he came to understand how costly the salvation of the whole world was going to be.

Jesus shows us, though, that the way of the cross is the only true way to life. Even in those moments when our courage fails us and the burden of the cross may seem too heavy to bear, Jesus shows us again and again it is the only way. He lifts

us up, forgives us, and renews our faith and life so that one day, if the day demands it, we shall be ready to follow him with our very lives. Amen.