

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

You are called “*Christians*,” and so now is Charlotte Grace. Today in the “forgiving flood” of Holy Baptism, Charlotte has received “*the gift of the Holy Spirit*,” [Acts 2:38] who “works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news.” She has been “sundered from the number of the unbelieving, preserved dry and secure in the holy ark of Christendom.” She has become a Christian. The Bible uses this term. Peter tells us that we should “*glorify God in that name*” [1 Pet. 4:16]. King Agrippa asks Paul if he was trying to persuade him to become a Christian [Acts 26:28]. But especially, we hear that in Antioch, “*the disciples were first called Christians*” [Acts 11:26].

Ah! There is the more common word for Christian in the Bible—disciple. We don’t use it as often today, but there it is: disciple. A μαθητής, a pupil, a follower of Jesus. Jesus today began by talking to His disciples. “*Go and make disciples of all nations*,” Jesus said to the apostles, by baptizing and teaching. When Paul and Barnabas “*had preached the gospel ... and had made many disciples, they returned ... strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith*” [Acts 14:21-22]. Christians are disciples. They’re followers of “*the Way*,” [Acts 9:2] and the truth and the life [John 14:6], followers of Jesus. Yes, “*follow me*,” Jesus said [Matthew 16:24].

Which helps us understand what it means to be a Christian, doesn’t it? You are made a disciple through baptism, God’s grace pouring over you [Matthew 28:19], and that not of yourself; it’s a gift of God. It’s not your work. Stop your boasting. [Ephesians 2:8-9]. And you are kept in this faith, strengthened in this faith, encouraged in this faith by the Holy Spirit by the word, by teaching and preaching, and by the Sacrament of Christ’s body and blood. This isn’t your work either. It’s God’s work.

But that doesn’t mean that being a Christian is easy, or that you do nothing. In fact, you were created in Christ Jesus, given rebirth in Him, you died with Him and were raised with Him in order that you might walk in His ways, do the good works that He has prepared for you beforehand, “*that you might walk in them*” [Ephesians 2:10]. Christians love the Lord’s commandments and seek to do them, as Jesus teaches, “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*” [John 14:15].

That shines a light, I think, on the lie that says, “I can be a Christian, but openly and blatantly despise Christ, Christ’s gifts, Christ’s word”—never come to church; never receive the Sacrament; never contribute by time or treasures to the work of the ministry. No! Being a disciple means following Jesus and walking in His ways. Luther says it in our confessions: “those who are unwilling to learn the catechism [i.e., Christian doctrine] should be told that they deny Christ and are not Christians.” Again, if you don’t desire to receive the Sacrament “at least four times

a year, it is to be feared that [you despise] the Sacrament and [are] not a Christian, just as a person is not a Christian who does not believe or hear the Gospel.”

But, of course, being a Christian, following Jesus, can be hard. After all, the same temptations that are in the world are sure to come upon us. Thus Jesus says to us, *“pay attention to yourselves,”* that is to your lives, to what you do and say. You can’t just be like the world. *“Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints,”* St. Paul says. *“Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking,”* he teaches [Ephesians 5:3-4]. *“At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ... Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness”* [Ephesians 5:8, 11].

But your flesh is weak, you protest. Yes it is. So remember the promise, *“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it”* [1 Cor. 10:13].

He has provided the way of escape: it’s called repentance and forgiveness. He, who took on your flesh and knows your temptations, calls you to repentance, and He who shed His blood as the payment price for your sins, stands ready to deliver what His blood earned: forgiveness.

But Jesus continues and tells us more hard things to do as His followers. We who have been forgiven much are to look after our brothers and sisters. We are our brother’s keeper [Genesis 4:9]. And so, if you find that your brother or sister has sinned, Jesus says, *“rebuke him (or her), and if he repents, forgive him.”* Jesus here neither wants sin ignored nor anyone to Lord the sin over another. No, Christians are commanded to rebuke sin and to forgive the repentant sinner, because that’s what Jesus is about. He came to call *“sinners to repentance”* [Luke 5:32]. He came to win the victory over sin by His cross. He came to bestow forgiveness, and He sent His church out with forgiveness on their lips—*“forgive him,”* Jesus said. *“You must forgive him.”*

Of course, He gives His church pastors to do this publicly for the church, and privately for individuals, for confessing ones’ sins is hard, and we do not like to proclaim our sins in public. Thus, by Christ’s command and in His stead, pastors hear confession and speak the absolution, as Christ commanded on the night of His resurrection: *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them ...”* [John 20:23] for what is loosed on earth according to Christ’s command is loosed in heaven [Matthew 16:19].

Moreover, too often, we will hard-heartedly and self-righteously withhold forgiveness from someone who has sinned against us—repentance and forgiveness are hard. “I apologize” may express regret, but it is no synonym for “I repent.”

And “I accept your apology” may assuage the aggrieved person’s hurt feelings, but it does not bestow forgiveness. It does not mean the same thing as “I forgive you.” Christians are called to the harder tasks: repentance, that is regret over sin and a desire to do better; and forgiveness, that is, sending the sin away from the sinner and acknowledging that peace has been restored.

It’s no wonder, then, that the apostles, Jesus’ closest disciples, asked Him to “*increase their faith.*” Because following Jesus is hard. Following Jesus means loving your brothers or sisters when they’re pretty unlovable and we don’t want to. Following Jesus means doing all that He commands you to do, and taking no credit for it. Be gone with your pride and your boasting. You want to boast? Boast in the Lord. You want to give glory to someone? Give glory to the incarnate One, the crucified One, the resurrected One. For even if you could do all that you are commanded ... even if you could ... you would still be unworthy servants, only fulfilling your duty.

Our duty? Yes, following Jesus means that we are soldiers marching into battle in a spiritual warfare, not against “*flesh and blood, but ... against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*” And Charlotte has been burdened today with the same mighty and lifelong enemies. She has joined our ranks today, following Jesus, seeking to do all that He has commanded, yet falling short.

But thanks be to God, He has acted above and beyond the call of duty toward us. He does not punish us, unworthy servants, for our sins, but dutifully punished all sin in Jesus and in His cross, in His sinless Son, who has done all things well. He has given to us, instead of wrath, the cleansing fruit of His blood sacrifice, the cleansing flood of baptism, the cleansing word of forgiveness, the righteousness of faith.

And He increases our faith, just as the apostles prayed and as we pray, every time we follow Jesus to where He promises to be for us, as we gather in His name and hear His word and partake of His sacrament.

Being a follower of Jesus, His disciple, means to learn from Him. It means to know what Jesus and the prophets and apostles teach. It means to believe what He said when you come to the table He has prepared for you: that you receive the very body and blood of Your Lord given and shed for you to forgive you and to increase your faith.

So, come today, O Christians, you followers of Jesus, and be “*strengthened in faith toward [Him] and in fervent love toward one another.*” His way is hard, but His way the only way of salvation. May God ever increase our faith as we take up our cross and follow after Jesus to everlasting life.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.