

Second Weekend in Lent (RCL/B):

“Daring to Take on Kingdom Work & Carry the Cross: Elizabeth Fedde, Emma Francis & Us”

Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

February 24-25, 2024

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

There’s a great 3-way connection this weekend: our lesson from Romans about hoping against hope and not wavering in faith, our Gospel from Mark about denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus, and Sunday’s calendar commemoration of 2 Lutheran deaconesses who ministered in New York City in the late 1800’s and early 20th century, Elizabeth Fedde from Norway and Emma Francis from the British West Indies.

The Gospel includes our Lord’s first prediction of His passion, death and resurrection, triggering Peter’s horrified, “God forbid it, Lord!” for which Jesus “rebukes” Peter. Then our Lord gathers the crowd together with His disciples to announce what membership in His “club” will cost:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)

“Deny themselves” means to put God and others first. (I have little prayer cards that say JOY vertically. Look closer and the letters JOY become Jesus, Others, You.) Denying myself isn’t saying, “You got it wrong, I’m not Pastor Mary.” Denying myself means that I’m not always #1 on my own agenda, my own pleasure or convenience isn’t the driving factor in most decisions I make, and I pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance, so that I’m about God’s business and am not just following my best guess of the moment.

Following Jesus isn’t simply giving lip service to “Jesus is Lord.” *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross....”* doesn’t leave room for cheap grace: I’m not free to take the gift of Jesus’ sacrifice on Calvary for granted.

I don't get to say, "That's nice," nod my head in the direction of the cross, and go about my self-serving business. Sometimes we talk about "cheap grace" to emphasize that the price of our salvation **wasn't** cheap. It is **priceless**: the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. St. Paul emphasized that when he wrote: "You have been bought with a price. Your life is not your own."

That point of view was lived out by Lutheran deaconesses Elizabeth Fedde and Emma Hermina Francesca Francis. Elizabeth was born in Norway on Christmas Day in 1850. Both her parents died by the time she was 19. At that time she began training as a Lutheran deaconess and nurse. While still in her 20's, she founded a hospital in rural Norway. She became ill and had to recuperate at a relative's home. On her 32nd birthday, Christmas Day in 1882, she received a letter asking her to go to NY City and minister to Norwegian seamen in port and on their ships. The letter said, "You can come immediately if you dare, can, and will take on this work."¹

She did dare, absolutely could, and did take on that work, sailing to America that spring, although she knew no English. She must have been a quick study, though, because in no time the Norwegian deaconesses established what was called the Norwegian Relief Society. They rented 3 small rooms for \$9/month, near what was and still is the Seamen's Church (Institute) in lower Manhattan. A brief biography of her says:

The condition of the Norwegian immigrants to whom she ministered was indescribable: physical and mental illness, financial and spiritual poverty, abounded. In addition to her work with Norwegian seamen, she visited Ward Island Immigrant Hospital, founded homes for widows and orphans, collected and distributed food and clothing to the poor, made burial arrangements, taught Sunday School, solicited funds for ship fares for the disillusioned who wanted to return home.²

Elizabeth Fedde also established what became the Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn, and Lutheran Deaconess Home and Hospital in Minneapolis.

'Hard to imagine all of this was accomplished by someone who did not enjoy good health. In 1895 Sister Elizabeth returned to Norway because of chronic illness. At the age of 45 she married and enjoyed 25 years of marriage before passing away in 1921.

A woman added to our Lutheran calendar of commemorations more recently is another deaconess, Emma Hermina Francesca Francis. Sister Emma was of African ancestry and was born in 1875 in the British West Indies. After studying in Antigua and in Germany, she opened an orphanage for girls on St. Croix. When the US took control of the Virgin Islands in 1917, Sister Emma became associated with the Lutheran deaconess motherhouse in Philadelphia. She was a founder of the Lutheran Church of the Transfiguration on 126th St. in NYC (Harlem) and served there for 5 years before returning to the orphanage on St. Croix. Her funeral in April of 1945 had one of the greatest attendances on record for the island: she was well-loved! There is still a tight connection between some Lutheran churches in NYC and in the Virgin Islands, largely because of Sister Emma's ministry.

The lives and ministries of these 2 women of faith are great examples of what it means to deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow Jesus by serving the last, the lost and the least, at significant cost to self: forsaking personal convenience and creature comforts, facing the dangers of transatlantic travel, courageously confronting the unknown, ministering to very great need with very limited material resources. In faith they dared take on the kingdom work to which they were called, immediately and without reservation.

'Seems to me we can say of them what Paul wrote about Abraham in today's lesson from Romans:

No distrust made [them] waver concerning the promises of God, but [they] grew strong in [their] faith as [they] gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what God promised. (Romans 4:20)

In the Book of Acts we read how the apostles created the role of deacon to care for widows and orphans, distribute food to the needy, tend to the physical needs of the people so the apostles could care for their spiritual needs. Since then deacons and deaconesses have continued lifegiving ministry to at-risk children, single parents, impoverished families, immigrants, the physically and mentally ill, the incarcerated. Over time deacons took on other specialized roles in the parish, like Sister Emma had at the Lutheran Church of the Transfiguration, and like Ned, our nearly-ordained deacon, has here at Holy Trinity, directing the ministries of Worship & Music and Youth & Family Ministry. Pastors perform a ministry of Word and sacrament. Deacons perform a ministry of Word and service.

Our **shared** calling to serve our Lord in word and deed comes in Holy Baptism, though. As we'll hear in the installation rite for our Council members today, the Spirit gives many **different** gifts, but the **same** Lord is served through them all. The prayer of the day for the commemoration of Elizabeth Fedde and Emma Francis is a special prayer that **we** will fully engage, like them, in our own baptismal calling:

God of compassion, your Son came among us not to be served but to serve. By his love, reflected in the sacrifice of your servants, Elizabeth Fedde and Emma Francis, encourage us to serve those to whom the world offers no comfort and little help, giving hope to the hopeless, love to the unloved, peace to the troubled, and rest to the weary; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen³

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

¹Phillip H. Pfatteicher, *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations: A Proposed Common Calendar of Saints* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), p. 100.

²Ibid.

³Ibid, p. 102.