

Pastor Joe Polzin
Mark 8:27-38
“Taking Up Our Cross”
Year B – Second Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2018

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

“[Jesus] said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.’”

This call from Jesus to follow him is well-known, and appears in three of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It’s where we get the phrase, “bearing one’s cross,” which is a powerful reminder of what it means to follow Christ.

For the Christians in the early years of the Church, I imagine that hearing Jesus talk about taking up your cross and losing your life was incredibly important, as Christians *were* losing their lives for their faith, some of them on *literal* crosses. So when they heard the words, “Whoever would lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it,” they were reassured that there was something far more valuable than their earthly life. *Eternal* life was awaiting them. So, even while their enemies attempted to take their life away, the life that Jesus gives is something that can *never* be taken away.

But how do *we* hear these words from Jesus today? In our time, except for rare cases, we don’t have to worry about losing our life for our faith. There are some parts of the world where that may not be true, but in the United States, we’re free to practice our faith. What does taking up our cross mean for us?

It’s led some people to try and find another meaning for what Jesus describes, other than actually losing one’s life. And one common way you’ll hear this interpreted in many sermons, or devotions, or Bible studies is to equate taking up our cross with our commitment to Jesus. That taking up our cross is something that we need to figure out how to do. It becomes a way to encourage Christians to show God that you’re serious about your faith, and although you might not have to sacrifice your actual life, you’re willing in some way, shape, or form to allow your life to be “uncomfortable for Christ.” You’re willing to give up the things that you would normally *prefer* to do, and instead do things for the sake of Christ.

Therefore, you might give up some of your free time to volunteer, or increase your offering at church, or even risk offending some friends by sharing with them your faith. You don’t want to be “ashamed of Jesus,” as he says, when he returns. So, how do you prove you’re not ashamed? By living out your faith. Doing things for Jesus. By metaphorically “losing your life” and “taking up your cross.”

But is *this* what Jesus is saying? Is this really what his words mean for us? When you begin to consider the reality of the cross that Jesus had to bear, as well as the Christians in the early Church as they lost their lives, equating Jesus’ words with something about our commitment for him seems so shallow. So, have we in our modern, North American context, lost the ability to truly understand what Jesus is telling us?

Now, I’m not saying those things I mentioned about living out our faith don’t belong in our Christian lives. They may. But what I am saying is that there’s a more critical meaning to what Jesus is talking about, a meaning that’s focused on him, not on our commitment to him.

There's something much more consequential that has great importance in terms of understanding who he is, and who we are in relationship to him. And how can we tell what this meaning is? By looking at what prompted Jesus to say what he said in the first place.

Remember, Jesus was traveling with his disciples. And along the way, they were having a discussion about who Jesus truly is. And Peter makes his well-known confession, "You are the Christ" (8:29). And Jesus "strictly charged them to tell no one about him," because he knew the disciples still didn't understand what it meant that he was the Christ.

So, Jesus proceeds to explain it to them. He tells them that "the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected... and be killed, and after three days rise again." Mark even adds that Jesus "said [all] this plainly" (8:32). Jesus isn't trying to confuse them or hide the reason why he's come. He wants them to know. But they still wouldn't understand what his path truly entailed. And they wouldn't understand because the path of Jesus Christ would involve suffering, and shame, and crucifixion, and death. His path would involve the cross.

Though Peter correctly confessed Jesus as the Christ, he rejected Jesus' explanation of what the Christ meant. So, he pulls Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. And we often say that Peter rebuked Jesus because he had a different Christ in mind. His Christ would have been a powerful earthly king, using his power to demonstrate his authority and establish an earthly kingdom. Which is likely true. But Peter also rebukes Jesus because if what Jesus said is true, then that says something about Peter, and everyone who would follow Christ, as well.

You see, this may seem obvious, but if Jesus is the Christ who had to come to die for the sins of the world, that means that we're the sinners who needed dying for. If Jesus is the Christ who came "while we were still weak," as our Epistle Reading states (Romans 5:6), that means we're the weak ones. If Christ died for the ungodly, that makes us ungodly ones. If he died to reconcile those who were enemies of God, that makes us the enemies of God (5:10).

Generally speaking, humans beings don't like to admit our weaknesses. We don't like admit our faults, or that we need help. We don't like to think of anything that compromises our own strength, our own trust in our abilities, our own independence. How much harder is it for us to admit that we're not only incapable of doing anything on our own that can please God, but also that without Christ we are horrendously sinful people, enemies of God, and directly opposed to Him in every way? Are we comfortable making that confession?

Peter wasn't. He couldn't accept all that about himself. And it may be hard for us to accept, as well. And yet, unless we confess all of that is true, then what we're really saying is that we have no need of a Christ would come to "suffer... be rejected... and be killed" for us. That all that Jesus did was unnecessary.

And if this is what we're saying, then we like Peter rebuke Jesus' description of what it means for him to be Christ. We, too, take Jesus aside and say that we don't need his help. And when Jesus comes again one day in the glory of his Father with all the holy angels, what he'll find is us living lives where we've called ourselves Christians, where we've claimed that we took up our crosses and followed him, but instead we acted the whole time as if we never actually needed him.

That's what Jesus means when he says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Following Jesus isn't a competition to see who's the most committed Christian, and therefore earning God's approval. No, following Jesus first and foremost is a recognition that who you are by nature is a sinful human. A sinful person, who in recognition of their sins, picks up a cross and is crucified alongside our Lord.

This is what it means to “lose your life.” It’s to acknowledge that your life is humble and forfeit when it comes to standing before a holy and almighty God. We deserve nothing but the just punishment for who we are and what we’ve done. We approach God not with pride, but in humility and repentance. We expect to follow Christ not to glory, but to the cross. And unless we take seriously our sin, we cannot take seriously our Savior.

I think this is one of the main reasons we see a decline in church membership, a decline in the church in general in our western culture. It’s because, by and large as a society, we’ve bought into two lies: the humanistic lie that humans are just fine the way we are, and the modernistic lie that human progress, and how far we’ve come with technology, have advanced us as a people so that we don’t need anyone’s help, certainly not any of God’s help, if there is a God. And when people lose the recognition of their need for God and for a Savior, then there’s no real reason they’d come to church.

Some churches try to counter that by re-imagining what church is, and marketing it as a social hang out spot, where we enjoy one another’s company, do some fun things together, and get enough spiritual enthusiasm for the week, until we come back again the next Sunday. In other words, church becomes one of many places people can go for therapeutic “feel-good-ism.”

But entirely lost from all this is the fact that, as human beings, we don’t need a Savior who coaches us from the sideline. And we don’t need a Savior who gives us a slap on the back and tells us that everything is going to be okay. We need a Savior who rebukes us like Peter, rebukes our sinfulness and stubbornness. And even when nothing is getting through our sin-darkened hearts, we need a Savior who is still willing to go to the cross and die for us, for our sins, for the punishment from God that we deserve.

Jesus is that Savior. And that’s exactly what he’s done, for you and for me. What Jesus says here today, it’s as if he’s saying directly to you, “If you would come follow me, first realize that I didn’t come to earth because you were a good person. You were lost in your sin, and you needed me. And I came to offer myself for you. To show you just how much I love you, by taking this journey to the cross for you. And I also rose again, to show you that you will live with me forever.

“So, if you’re going to follow me, if you’re going to be my disciple, your sinful self will die. Your sinful self that was first drowned in the waters on the day you were baptized, and drowns every day as you remember your Baptism. The Holy Spirit will convict you of your sin, but not to push you away from me. To bring down the walls of sin that separate us, and to bring you closer to me, in repentance.

“And when you repent of your sin, when you realize your sinful life is forfeit, I will be there to give you life. Not your old life, but new life. Life in me. Life through the forgiveness of sins, which I won for you by my death on the cross, and secured by my rising again from the grave. Nothing that you will ever encounter in this world will ever be able to compare to this precious gift, which I give to you for free.

“And when I come again, it won’t be shameful for you to say, ‘Yes, I was sinner my whole life, and I constantly needed the forgiveness my Savior offered to me.’ Because I will look on you, as will my Father, and we won’t see your shame, but instead we’ll see someone who has been washed clean by the blood that I sacrificed for you.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, when this is the understanding of our sin, and the understanding of what our Savior means to us, of course our lives will be drastically different. How could they not?

How could we not crave what Christ offers us through His Word and Sacrament here in church, and seek this forgiveness and grace as often as possible? How could we not allow the death of our former sinful lives, and the gain of new life in Christ to impact the way we live? How could we not allow the love we've been shown by God to pour through us to others? Being gracious, loving, self-sacrificial, and willing to share with others the hope that we've been given by Christ? How could we not even be willing to lose our earthly lives, if God leads us to do so, knowing that Christ gave up his life for us, so that we never have to doubt where we'll be spending eternity?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, describes the call to follow Jesus as "costly grace." He says, "Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son... and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us."

Let us hear the call of Christ today as "costly grace," the call to take up our crosses and follow him, which *will* cost us our lives. But thanks be to God, Jesus promises that when our life is lost for his sake and the gospel's, it will be saved. Jesus has already saved it, and has given us eternal life. In his name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.