

The Way of the Cross

Mark 8:31-38

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin today's sermon by telling a shortened version of a story many of you have heard before. A very shortened version. The story took place in the summer of 2015.

That summer my predecessor Dan Powell and I were doing a test run on the idea of holding Saturday evening contemporary worship services in our fellowship hall. During one of those services, a homeless man drifted in and sat at the back of our makeshift sanctuary. His name was Michael.

- When you got close to him, you quickly realized he had been drinking.
- When you talked to him, you quickly realized he had some mental problems, not the least of which were thoughts of suicide.

Again ... shortened version ... we got him the help he needed that night.

On Monday evening, my cell phone rang. It was Michael. He got my number from my business card and called shortly after Karen and I sat down at the dinner table.

Michael needed me to come back to the church, right away. It was urgent. There was someone he wanted me to meet. Her name was Katrina. She was a drug addict who had been turned away from everyone of her family members. She had broken her leg in a fall down the stairs while high on cocaine and had just been released from the hospital. She had nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

Michael and Katrina met earlier on Monday while walking around the neighborhood near Wittenberg University. They had never met before that Monday. They were just two needy people with nowhere to go, who were walking and connected. Sounds like the lyrics to a Simon and Garfunkel song.

- "You have to meet this guy named Tom," Michael told her. "He's a pastor of a church. He can help you."
- The only problem was that he didn't remember where our church was. But he did remember there was a big cross at the back of our property, and that you could see the cross from Bechtle Avenue.

He told her simply this:

If we can get to the cross, from there it's easy.

One of the greatest theological statements I ever heard, spoken by a suicidal drunk to his drug addicted friend.

- Did you hear it? How do you find grace? You go to the cross. From there it is easy.
- Whether you are a suicidal drunk or not, how do you find God's grace? You go to the cross. From there it is easy.

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. Throughout this season we are organizing ourselves around a two-word theme:

THE WAY

Our theme is based on this simple teaching of Jesus recorded in John 14:6:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

I am encouraging you to memorize this verse because I am convinced that cementing its words in your heart will help protect you in a world that offers many alternate ways.

Today our focus is on THE WAY OF THE CROSS, and our teaching is drawn from these words in Mark 8:

Then (Jesus) called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mark 8:34-37)

Let me highlight three pairs of words:

PAIR #1: DENY THEMSELVES

Look at verse 34:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must **deny themselves** and take up their cross and follow me. (Mark 8:34)

The Greek word here means that we ...

Go blind to ourselves and our self-interests.

As we WALK THE WAY OF JESUS, we lose sight of the things that used to be the most important things in our lives. They fade into the background until we no longer see them.

I saw a TV commercial recently where three members of a band were trying to decide on the perfect photo for their new album cover. The basic picture included all three of them stationed at different places around this street corner. They were far enough apart that whichever one came into focus caused the other two to be blurry ... and of course each wanted to be the one in focus.

Denying myself means I let Jesus be in focus in my life and everything gets so blurry I can no longer make out what it is. In our opening hymn we sang about taking all of our trophies and discarding them. Because those things that used to matter don't matter much anymore. Jesus matters, but nothing else does. As our text puts it:

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? (Mark 8:36)

The WAY OF THE CROSS requires me and my priorities to become blurry background images so that the attention of my life is drawn to Jesus and His cross and His will for me. What good is it if I get the attention and Jesus is in the blurry background?

PAIR #2: TAKE UP

Look at verse 34:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and **take up** their cross and follow me. (Mark 8:34)

As you know some days I wear a collar. Wearing a collar has some really great benefits.

- People see my collar and they open doors for me.
- They let me go first in line.
- I walk down the halls of the hospital and people I don't know greet me and hold the elevator doors for me.
- I once had a man in a pickup truck angrily pass me while displaying one of fingers to me ... only to see my collar ... and pull back in behind me.

My collar identifies me as a member of the clergy. Even people who don't go to church know what it means. I can't wear it and remain anonymous.

We find the phrase "take up your cross" to be confusing. But people in Jesus' day knew exactly what it meant. They saw scores of criminals picking up their crosses in order to carry them to the place of execution. They knew that if you were carrying a cross you had been tried in a court of law and found guilty. The cross identified you as a criminal.

That's why Peter reacted as he did. He knew what the cross meant, and he knew that would not be true of Jesus. So our text says:

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. (Mark 8:32)

What Peter didn't understand until Pentecost Sunday was that the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus transformed the cross from the identifying mark of a criminal into the identify mark of His victory over sin, death and the devil. What was once a symbol of defeat became a symbol of victory.

You and I don't carry a visible cross around but this passage reminds that our daily responsibility is to figuratively pick one up ... because in that cross we become identified with Jesus in every way.

Each morning when you get out of bed, you pick up your cross and you remind yourself that I am walking the way of Jesus.

- Through each event that happens in the course of my day, the Holy Spirit prompts me to remember that cross on my shoulder.

Taking up your cross is not a daily reminder of suffering and pain. No, it is a reminder of your victory over everything the devil throws at you. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome:

We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8:37)

When you daily take up your cross, you are daily reaffirming your identity in Jesus Christ. I am a Christian. My life is shaped by what happened on a cross like this.

- Whatever comes my way today has already been defeated by Jesus.

PAIR #3: FOLLOW ME

Look at verse 34:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and **follow me**. (Mark 8:34)

Of the three pairs of words, I think this pair might be the hardest. It certainly was for Peter. As you heard in today's Gospel, when Jesus started to teach about His upcoming death, Peter rebuked Jesus. But we read:

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Mark 8:33)

In other words, "Peter stop trying to lead me. I want you to follow me." The way of the cross was not the way Peter envisioned. He had other plans for Jesus and a cross most certainly was not a part of those plans.

You see, you make yourself blurry and you can be reminded that there is cross on your shoulder and still live as though your way is better than God's way. Oh, how I want to lead sometimes! But each time God has to remind me that my role is to follow. Not lead.

Since He is the way, He knows the way. And I don't. So it works better if I follow.

APPLICATION

Thomas a' Kempis was a German-Dutch mystic in the early 1400s. He is the author of a really powerful series of meditations titled "The Imitation of Christ." He wrote these words:

There will always be many who love Christ's heavenly kingdom, but fewer who will bear his cross. Many are eager to be happy with him; fewer wish to suffer anything for him.

Many love Christ as long as they encounter no hardship; many praise and bless him as long as they receive some comfort from him. But if Jesus hides himself and leaves them for a while, they either start complaining or become dejected. Those, on the contrary, who love him for his own sake and not for any comfort of their own, praise him both in trial and anguish of heart as well as in the bliss of consolation... What power there is in a pure love for Jesus – love that is free from all self-interest and self-love!

Take up your cross and follow Jesus, and you will inherit everlasting life. There is no other way to life and to true inward peace than the way of the cross. Go where you will, seek what you want, you will not find a higher way, nor a less exalted but safer way, than the way of the cross. (Thomas a Kempis)

Amen.