

## ***The Call of the Cross***

Mark 8:31-38

March 8, 2009

### **I.**

You all probably came to church this morning to pray and worship, to be refreshed and renewed, to be meditative and thoughtful, and then the preacher stands up and yells "fire!" Some of you might think that's what happened with today's Gospel. What do we do with passages from the Bible like this? We cannot just disregard them just because they seem harsh or demanding.

And these readings are not unusual. We frequently hear Jesus' words across the centuries from a different culture and a different time with images and metaphors not commonly used today. And doesn't it sometimes seem that Jesus' words are not the words we would use to invite someone into the church?

But we have to believe that Jesus was speaking to us today as well as to the disciples then, and we must be faithful to the circumstances of that time as well as the words of the text in order to grasp the meaning. We cannot just put our own spin on it to suit our own purposes.

### **II.**

A good place to start is with some background. Prior to the events described today, Jesus carried out a ministry of healing and teaching in and around Galilee, a relatively safe place for him, and for his disciples. He had not yet been seen as a serious threat to the Jewish elders, chief priests, and scribes mentioned at the beginning of the reading. And the Romans probably viewed him as the harmless leader of one of the many Jewish sects that existed at the time.

After today's events, however, he began his fateful journey to Jerusalem and the cross, and he knew the dangers would increase. Roman and Jewish leaders would watch him more closely. Those who accompanied him also would come under scrutiny. It would be risky, and he wanted his disciples to understand those risks. He used strong language to make his point.

And sometimes his words did not reflect the gentle and compassionate Jesus we learned about in Sunday School. Today's reading is a good example of that; it does not seem to display Jesus' kindness and goodness so evident earlier in his ministry.

Instead, we hear a defiant and forceful Jesus who spoke harshly to Peter when Peter refused to believe that Jesus would suffer and die. He likened Peter's objections to the work of Satan. Then, not stopping there, Jesus set forth a series of seemingly impossible standards of discipleship and salvation.

You must deny yourself, he said, and pick up your cross. Try to save your life and you will lose it. If you seek worldly goods now you will lose eternity later. If you are ashamed of me now, I will be ashamed of you later. What was behind these apparent ultimatums? How did Jesus intend them then, and how are we to understand them today?

These verses have three parts that lead to a fundamental message in this section of Mark's Gospel. And they are just as applicable to us today as they were to the disciples then.

The first part was Jesus' rebuke of Peter for his self-interested and worldly view that Jesus had come as a conquering messiah who would drive out the Romans and restore the glory of Israel. This rejection of worldly things led to the second part, which is to take up our crosses and follow him. But for those who do not, then the third part describes the consequences of that failure in terms of eternal separation from God.

In a nutshell, today's Gospel tells us that if we believe, then here is what we are called to do, and if we don't do it, then here is what happens. So for us as faithful Christians, the central part of today's Gospel is about what Jesus told us to do as a result of our belief. It is the instruction to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow him.

### III.

This is strong language. And at the time it easily could have been misunderstood. In first century Palestine the cross was a very real symbol of persecution and death.

And even today the term "cross" can have unpleasant connotations. A cross can be a modern metaphor for a burden we have, or a tragedy we experience, or a chronic illness, or physical handicap. If someone tells us they have a cross to bear, we might regard that in a negative way, and be thankful that we do not have their problem.

These disturbing passages can lead some people, even though they profess Christian faith, to simply disregard parts of the Bible that seem to contain harsh or inflexible teachings. There is a certain type of a loving Jesus they can accept, but a demanding Jesus just does not fit their purposes or expectations.

I have described this in the past as "salad bar spirituality." It also has been called "cafeteria Christianity." You know how salad bars and cafeterias work. You take what you like and just pass over the things that don't seem as appealing to you. Some people look at faith the same way. They create a taste-good, feel-good religion limited to comfortable things without any of the challenges that are part of some important biblical teachings.

For those who adopt this brand of postmodern Christianity, religion has become a consumer item. If you like it, buy it. If not, leave it on the shelf. If it works for you, that's all that counts.

In this respect I'm reminded of a play I saw at a church during its Lenten program; something like what our own Amazing Praisers do. It was called *The Discipleship Store*, and was about a place where people who wanted to be disciples could go to pick up the things they needed.

In the final act one of the customers, who had read today's passage from Mark, was in the store looking for a cross. The first thing he asked was if they had padded crosses; he didn't want it to be too uncomfortable. When told there were none, he asked for a cross that wasn't too big; one that would fit under his coat. "Can't be too obvious about these things," he said. And when told there was only one size, he asked if there was a cross that came with a carrying case that would make it easier to lift, or perhaps a stand he could put it in when he wanted to set it down for a while.

Then while the customer continued to talk with the clerk, the sound faded, the lights dimmed, the Rector came on stage with the spotlight on him, and he talked about some of the things that I am talking about today.

And the basic message was that we must fully bring Jesus into our lives with no reservations or conditions. We live the Christian life all the time, in every way; not just when it's convenient. It is not sufficient to be Christians only in some ways but not others.

You might have heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a respected German theologian executed by the Nazis because he would not tailor his teaching to their wishes, and refused to join the lukewarm clergy who supported Hitler.

He referred to this part-way Christianity as "cheap grace" as distinguished from God's true grace. Part of what he said was, "Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring

repentance. Cheap grace is baptism without discipleship. It is absolution without confession. Cheap grace is what the world offers, it is grace without Jesus Christ.”

That type of faith and spirituality can be misleading. It can create a false sense of piety and intimacy with God because it requires no effort, and there is no accountability. There is no need to do anything that might be inconvenient, and there is no call to live a life that truly places God first. It’s based on wishful thinking that God’s love will save everyone, and it ignores the reality that the day inevitably will come when we all must account for the content of our lives.

A current best-seller some of you might have read is *The Shack*, by William Paul Young. It’s a fanciful tale about a weekend with God that offers some good perspectives on what the Trinity is, but goes far afield on what the Trinity does. It also reflects this watered-down version of Christianity articulated by Bonhoeffer. I will discuss the book in greater detail during our three-part adult education course on the Trinity after Easter.

#### **IV.**

So, for Christians in the twenty-first century, the message of today’s reading is to place our Lord and Savior first. But doing that does not mean we must give up our possessions, or our jobs, or our recreation, or our families. Rather, it means that we cannot place them above him.

Faithful Christianity is not inconsistent with comfort, so long as our comfort does not take precedence over our call to love God, to love each other, and to care for those in need. And denying ourselves is not inconsistent with prosperity so long as we use our prosperity in righteous ways.

St. Paul told us in 1 Timothy that the love of money is the root of all evil (6:10). The key words, however, are “love of money,” not “possession of money.” There is nothing wrong with wealth so long as we are good stewards of that wealth. And when we put God first and let him govern our lives, then we have become good stewards and have taken up our cross.

I do not, however, want to minimize what it takes to place God first. When Jesus began to lead his disciples to Jerusalem he was not just taking them on a nice afternoon walk. And when he got to Jerusalem he was not crucified just because he was offering his disciples some useful self-help suggestions about how to be nicer people.

Instead, he was preparing them for what was coming on Good Friday and Easter, and then to go into a hostile world. In the same way we are called to prepare ourselves for the coming kingdom. And it might take more than a few minor adjustments to do that. The bottom line is that God comes first, before everything else.

#### **V.**

So how do we put Jesus first? In many ways we are asked to do things that are not part of our human nature. It might not seem natural to deny ourselves. It is not easy to develop spiritual disciplines. Sometimes we are not accustomed to putting others ahead of ourselves.

But that is what we are called to do. And though prayer, and the study of Scripture, and living together in a community of faith, and following the leading of the Holy Spirit, God will show us the way. He will not burden us with more than we can bear, and he will guide us to what is best for us. If we truly seek him in prayer and faith, he will not let us down.

If we do this, we can find that taking up the cross is not a burden, but a joy. And following Jesus is not a task to be dreaded, but rather a way of life that fills us with peace and lightens our loads. The way of the cross is the way of life. *Amen.*