

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 8:31-38 (NRSV)

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. [32] He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. [33] But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

[34] He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. [35] For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. [36] For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? [37] Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? [38] Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

I HAVEN'T GOT TIME FOR THE PAIN

I saw a book with an intriguing title, "Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants." It's hard to think of pain as a gift. But, in some ways it can be true. Pain is a warning signal. Pain tells us that something is wrong with our bodies.

There are those who don't have this gift, and quite often they inadvertently harm themselves.

And yet, as the title suggests, it is also a gift that nobody wants. None of us want to deliberately experience pain and suffering. When I go to the doctor or the dentist, do you think that I tell them to spare the anesthetic that I would like to experience a little more pain? Not at all. In fact, I am quick to point out that since I'm a big man, perhaps it would be good to increase the dosage of pain killer.

No wonder Peter and the rest of the disciples were less than enthusiastic when Jesus laid out what He was called to do. Jesus was not promising to increase the dosage of pain killer, quite the contrary.

Jesus would assume the role of a suffering servant, a role predicted by the prophets. Jesus would suffer many things at the hands of the religious and political leaders. And it would all end with his death. The road to Jerusalem was a road to the cross.

And Jesus invited his disciples to take up a cross and follow him on that road.

This was definitely not what the disciples wanted. Who in their right mind would want such an invitation? Do you want to take up a cross?

Let me remind you that the cross was a terrible sign of capital punishment. It would be the equivalent of saying take up your electric chair and follow me. Who would respond positively to an invitation like that?

No wonder Peter, speaking for the disciples, pulled Jesus aside and said, "Man you've got to get a grip on yourself. What's all this talk about suffering and pain? Snap out of it. That's crazy talk."

They wanted the old Jesus back, the Jesus who did mighty works. They wanted the old Jesus back who would make things easier for them and those they loved. They wanted the Jesus who could miraculously feed thousands with only five loaves of bread and two small fish. They wanted the Jesus who could heal the sick and cast out demons.

But, that Jesus was gone. Jesus was moving on down the road to Jerusalem. He was already on the way that would lead to the cross. There would be no turning back. And if the disciples wanted to stay with Jesus, they would have to go with him down that difficult road.

And so Peter rebuked Jesus, dressed him down like a schoolmaster talks to a recalcitrant student.

SATANIC

And Jesus in turn rebuked Peter. Actually, he called him Satan.

What was Satanic about Peter's desire to escape the suffering of the cross? Didn't it just make sense? Doesn't any sane person just want to avoid pain whenever possible? Indeed, isn't that why we want to be on God's side ... so he can take away our pain and bless us?

That seems to be what many churches are teaching. A preacher told of a billboard that he passed on his way to work each day. It was paid for by a local church and it had a picture of their young, good looking preacher smiling and clutching a Bible.

Beneath the pastor's smiling face, there was always a different human malady listed each week. Confused? Lonely? Depressed? Call this phone number. We have the answer.

That billboard was meant to present a faith that existed to fulfill needs, pump us up and make us happy. Where does it itch? According to the billboard, the Christian faith is all about scratching that itch.

At least that's what many would like to believe.

But, Jesus will not allow us to indulge in such fantasies. Following Jesus is not about having our every whim indulged. Following Jesus is about sacrifice, real hard sacrifice. Following Jesus is not the road to safety. Following Jesus leads to a cross. It was true then, and it is true now.

WILL SACRIFICE FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE

We may think that people will not willingly take up a cross and follow Jesus. We may think that in order to reach the people we must scratch their itch. But, I would suggest that there are many people who are looking for something that is important enough that they would give their life for it. Indeed, I would suggest that is what we need.

There is no meaning in a life of ease and comfort. Only when we sacrifice for something meaningful do we feel truly alive.

That's why many young people join the Peace Corps or do mission work or join the armed forces. They are looking for something meaningful to which they can commit their life.

Early in this century a London newspaper carried an advertisement that read, "Men wanted for hazardous journey: small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness and constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success."

The ad, signed by the famous Arctic explorer, Sir Ernest Shackleton brought inquiries from thousands of men.

Commenting on this in his book, "Be Faithful" Warren Wiersbe said, "If Jesus Christ had advertised for workers, the announcement may have read something like this:

Men and women wanted for the difficult task of helping to build my church. You will often be misunderstood, even by those working with you.

You will face constant attack from an invisible enemy. You may not see the results of your labor, and your full reward will not come until after all your work is completed. It may cost you your home, your ambitions and even your life."

THE TEMPTATION TO TAKE THE EASY WAY OUT

In our desire to make the gospel attractive, could it be that we, like Peter, want to downplay any talk of suffering and sacrifice? But, you can't have Christ without the cross. In fact, Jesus' rebuke of Peter suggests that this illusion can be the ultimate temptation of the devil himself.

Do you remember the temptation stories in the Bible?

Satan tempted Jesus in three ways.

He tempted a hungry Jesus to turn stones into bread.

He tempted Jesus to conquer the world through bowing down to him (that is, using the devil's techniques to gain power).

And finally, he tempted Jesus to wow the crowd by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple and have the angels of the Lord rescue him from certain death.

These three temptations all had something in common. None of them mentioned a cross. There was never any sacrifice. The temptation of Jesus (and our temptation as well) is the temptation to take the easy way instead of God's way.

The Bible tells us that Jesus left the wilderness after he was tempted, but we also learn in that temptation dogged him all of his life. In this case temptation came in the form of friends and disciples who urged him to take an easier, more reasonable path. But, Jesus refused to turn from the way of the cross.

Jesus was well aware of the great sacrifice that would be required of him, and like all human beings he dreaded that sacrifice. Later in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus would once again be tempted go some other way than the way of the cross. He prayed in the garden, "If there's any other way, Lord, let's try it."

But, there was no other way and Jesus obediently followed the way of the cross. Jesus did not let the temptation of the easy way win out. In the end he prayed to his heavenly father, "Not my will but yours be done."

STRUGGLE AND SALVATION

The struggle of Jesus to follow the way of the cross is also our struggle as well. We too are tempted to take the easy way out; we too are tempted to think that God's kingdom can come through displays of power and promises of easy victory.

But, Jesus reminds us that we must go through the valley to make it to the mountaintop. Jesus tells us that (as the old hymn puts it) the "way of the cross leads home." The struggle of the cross can still be used by God to bring about a greater salvation. We can only become the people God wants us to be by taking up the cross and following Jesus.

There was a high school swimmer a few years back by the name of Nelson Diebel. Nelson dreamed of making it to the Olympics. He was life guard at his high school pool, and one day he got bored. And he decided it would be cool to jump into the pool from high up in the spectator's balcony.

Unfortunately he slipped just as he was starting his dive and fell short of the pool ... shattering both his hands and wrists on the surrounding deck. After the accident he had pins holding his hands and wrists together, and the doctors told him he would probably never swim again.

It was a devastating time for young Nelson. But, Nelson had a coach named Chris who refused to give up on his potential swimmer. He made him get back in the water as soon as the casts were off ... even though Nelson could not swim a bit.

He pushed Nelson to work his legs and then get his arms back into condition. Late one afternoon Nelson told the coach he was too tired to go on. His coach said nothing. He simply pulled all the ladders out of the pool, turned out the lights and left.

He left Nelson alone in the pool.

The only way Nelson could get out of the water without using his fragile wrists was to hook his elbows through the rungs of a ladder, and now there were no ladders. In order to stay afloat, Nelson had to keep kicking.

Twenty minutes later the coach returned and put the ladders back in the water. He had proved that Nelson could do more than he thought he could. A few weeks later Nelson was swimming.

And in 1992 Nelson Diebold won the gold medal in Barcelona.

Despite his success, it seemed like a cruel thing that his coach did that day. But, Nelson later learned that while he was thrashing helplessly in the water with the ladders pulled up and the lights out, his coach had been watching him from the spectator's balcony.

As frightened as he was, he wasn't alone.

Sometimes when God calls us to take up our cross and follow Jesus, we panic. We want to make our life more secure, and God is telling us to take more chances. It's as if someone has pulled up the ladders and turned off the lights as we thrash around in the pool.

But, we need to remember that God is still watching over us as we struggle. God is cheering us on and giving us the strength we need to overcome and serve in his name.

CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

It's important to note that when Jesus told his disciples of suffering and rejection and a cross, that wasn't all he said. He also talked about a resurrection.

But, the disciples didn't understand.

In the ninth chapter of Mark's gospel Jesus makes a second prediction of his passion and resurrection as the disciples descended from the Mount of Transfiguration, that mount where Peter, James and John got a glimpse of Jesus in his glory. And the disciples talked among themselves asking, "What did he mean by resurrection?"

There can be no resurrection until there is first a crucifixion. Jesus told his disciples to tell no one about their experience until they had witnessed both the crucifixion and the resurrection.

The same is true for us as well. The promise of God's salvation in Jesus does not mean much for us until we have experienced the suffering of the cross ... until we personally make the decision to take up our cross and follow him.

But, when we do take up that cross, we make an amazing discovery. We discover that the cross is not so much a burden to bear but a way to experience true life.

Jesus once told his disciples,

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30 (NRSV)

Notice that we escape heavy burdens by taking upon ourselves the yoke of Jesus. When we take up the cross of Christ, we can lay down everything else. Instead of being worried about many things we are concerned about only one thing, serving others in the name of Christ.

SAVING OUR LIFE BY LOSING IT

Paradoxically those who seek life by avoiding all pain and danger never find the life they are seeking. But, those who voluntarily give up their life for the sake of God's kingdom find in the end that they have not lost anything. Indeed, they have gained what is truly important.

That's what Jesus meant when he told the crowd and his disciples,

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. [36] For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? [37] Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Mark 8:35-37 (NRSV)

Philip Yancy said that in his career as a writer and a journalist he had interviewed a wide range of people, but that he could divide them into roughly two groups: the stars and the servants.

The stars were those people who made it big in some area of life. The stars were NFL football greats, famous authors, TV personalities and captains of industry. And he said that quite often after he interviewed these stars, he actually felt sorry for them. "These idols," he said, "are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met." They appear to have more troubled marriages, tormented psyches and incurable self-doubts than most.

The servants, on the other hand, people like relief workers in Bangladesh, PhDs scattered through the jungles of South America translating the Bible into obscure languages ... and the like ...are the favored ones."

He said, "I was prepared to honor and admire these servants, to uphold them as inspiring examples. I was not, however, prepared to envy them.

But, now as I reflect on the two groups, stars and servants, the servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones. They work for low pay, long hours and no applause, 'wasting' their talents among the poor and uneducated. But, somehow in the process of losing their lives, they have found them."

A PARABLE OF SALVATION

Drifting snow and bitter cold threatened the lives of Sadhu Singh and his Tibetan companion as they crossed a Himalayan mountain pass. Fighting the sleep of death they stumbled over a mound in the trail. It was a man, half-dead.

The Tibetan refused to stop and continued on alone. But, the compassionate Sadhu shouldered the burden the best he could. Through his struggling, he began to warm up, as did the unconscious man. But, before reaching the village they found the Tibetan ... frozen to death.

Take that as a parable of our lesson for today. It shows how taking up a cross can save us. When we voluntarily take up a cross, when we voluntarily take up a burden out of compassion, that moment of shared suffering can become a means of salvation.

A cross is still a cross. The road is still long and difficult. But, Christ is with us on that road, and our willingness to take up the cross of suffering for another is powerful testimony to the salvation that is ours in him.

May God help us take up the cross this very day.
May we learn to lose our life so that we can find it.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN