

Second Sunday of Lent

March 8, 2009

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Sermon: "The Cross is Not Optional Equipment"

Jesus took the disciples for a long walk north of their headquarters in Capernaum. They journeyed from Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi which was on the slopes of Mount Hermon and near the headwaters of the Jordan River. It was here that Peter made the wondrous proclamation that Jesus was the Messiah or long-awaited king of Israel. Away from the clamoring crowds Jesus and the disciples came to an understanding about his identity. Looking south Jesus and his followers could see right down the Jordan valley. There on the hilly slopes they could see the road that was going to be walked all the way to Jerusalem. It would be a road of discovery, intense soul searching, and personal sacrifice. Jesus was ready to make that walk and he longed for the allegiance of his pupils as the journey began.

There in Caesarea Philippi Jesus began to share with his followers the meaning of faithfulness and the ingredients of sacrifice that would enrich their lives as being shared by Jesus who was ready to claim his royal throne as Israel's Messiah and the world's Savior. The healings, battles with evil, the extraordinary feedings, and stilling of storms were signs that God was beginning to exercise God's power as ruler of Israel and ultimately the world. God's justice and mercy would replace all human rule with its mixtures of justice and oppression and mercy and corruption. Jesus had been announcing the inbreaking of the kingdom or rule of God and now he was assuming the role of king.

Gathered together before that wondrous view of the southland, Jesus took time to talk to his disciples about the next phase of their program. Like football players before the Super Bowl, heavyweight boxers before the championship match, brides and grooms on their wedding days, and firefighters before a horrible blaze, Jesus began to share the **reality** of their future mission together. There was tension deep inside each disciple. Danger, personal injury, and even death awaited them as they turned with Jesus toward holy Jerusalem. The marching orders came from Jesus' own mouth, "You must take up your cross and follow me."

Peter speaking for all of us on that marvelous and challenging day sought to counter Jesus' directive. A Messiah, a true Messiah, would not have to suffer or die. But, Jesus would have none of Peter's stonewalling. Jesus ordered the evil to get behind him and to recognize that God's thoughts were not the same as human thoughts. The future was a way filled with sacrifice, risking, facing death, and winning one's life. It was the only way to allow the rule of God into human hearts. And, Jesus wanted the disciples to share the journey with him.

We are called by Jesus not only to walk behind him on his way to the cross, but we are also called to take up the cross and follow. Jesus teaches us plainly that the cross is not optional equipment for his followers. A Christian is someone who bears the cross of Christ.¹

The cross is not beautiful. It is a sign of death. It is death to all that would hold us back from being in Christ.

Following Jesus is, more or less, Mark's definition of what being a Christian means; and Jesus is not leading us on a pleasant afternoon hike, but on a walk into danger and risk.

¹ William H. Willimon, "Crucifers," *Pulpit Resource*, March 8, 2009, 41.

Or did we suppose that the kingdom of God would mean merely a few minor adjustments in our ordinary lives?²

The cross is not optional equipment for any of us who wish to follow Jesus. We are crucifers who carry the cross wherever we go. Just as Jesus said, “You are the light of the world,” or bearers of light (lucifers), we are also cross bearers. What does it mean to carry the cross? The early church father Tertullian wrote, “Your cross means your own anxieties and sufferings in your own body.”

For many of us today, taking up our cross means being prepared to love our neighbors in Africa or USA who suffer from HIV/AIDS and seek ways of bringing comfort and hope to them in their agony. It means advocating for the weak among us who struggle with diseases like MS and helping our communities keep the doors open for our brothers and sisters.

It means helping folks in the Lancaster area through this difficult economic crisis with prayers and gifts of support. It means to volunteer as we feed the hungry at First Saturday breakfasts downtown and packing food for children and families so that they are fed between Friday afternoon and Monday morning. But, talking up your cross means much, much more.

Old Testament scholar and United Church of Christ member Walter Brueggemann wrote in *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* that the Christian faith, following Jesus Christ, is all about switching stories. He suggested that the story that tells Christians who they are is not the story of your parents, ancestors, gender, ethnic group or social class. The story of vocation, promise, deliverance, and gift is your family history, the story that defines who you are and what is

² Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 112.

really going on in the world. We find that story in the Bible. You are lovingly created for service to the true and loving God; you belong to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our story as Christians is very different from the other stories that define many people's lives. They have stories of success, finding the key to a happy, fulfilling life, and the joy of overcoming life's problems. Our story is found in the way we re-imagine our lives and change lives. Mark's gospel allows us to see how Jesus lays a different story over our lives. It is the story of the cross and it calls us to revision the story we thought we were living and to see our trials and tribulations as faithful steps on the way to the cross.

Jesus is calling each of us to follow him. We see ourselves in the faces of the disciples who gathered with him in Caesarea Philippi. Stanley Hauerwas, a professor of Christian ethics, writes, "the gospel is training in how to be incorporated in the Body of Christ, the Body that is formed by walking in obedience to the cross. To be a disciple is to be part of a new community, a new polity, which is formed on Jesus' obedience to the cross."³ The Gospel of Mark is a manual for training folks like us to be part of that new community Jesus is ushering in with his death on the cross.

A man came to his pastor saying how deeply concerned he had become about some of the practices at his workplace. He detected a clear pattern of how some people were promoted, and some were not promoted, purely on the basis of their race, the color of their skin. His boss repeatedly passed over some workers

³ Willimon, 43.

who performed well and were a credit to the company, because they were not of the same race as the boss.

His pastor urged him to carefully broach this subject with his boss. He ought to see if there were others in his company who shared his concern. He ought to be careful how he accused his boss of racial discrimination. He ought not to come across as 'holier than thou' or self-righteous.

The man followed his pastor's advice and eventually confronted his boss.

A month later, the man was unceremoniously fired. He couldn't get a job for a year, due to his boss' bad opinion of him. When he finally got a job, it was not as good a job as he once had.

Could we call this man a true bearer of the cross? I believe we could.

The cross is not optional equipment. Cross bearers will make sacrifices and endure the cruelty of a sinful world, because they have caught hold of the vision that Christ shared at Mount Hermon long ago. The merciless oppression and injustice of the world will never satisfy a cross bearer, for Christ's love for the world burns deep within the heart of a cross bearer. Our story is a story of being called to follow Jesus Christ. It is a story of knowing that we are never alone in our journey of faith. It is a story of being delivered from the death that comes with being separated from God. It is a story that claims eternal life through God's gift of his Son Jesus.

May we claim the cross as standard equipment today and follow the Christ there in this Lenten season. Amen.

A Prayer

Lord Jesus, you have come to us as our Savior, as our Messiah and we responded to you with rejection, hostility, and a cross. We still find it hard to believe that our Savior should suffer, be rejected, and die.. It's not we expected.

Lord Jesus, on top of that, you came to us promising that we should also be crucified, if we followed you, that we should also suffer, be rejected and die. It's not what we expected.

Lord Jesus, keep defeating our expectations, keep luring us to walk down your narrow way, keep calling us to follow you, despite the cost, keep believing in us, as we keep trying to believe in you. Amen.⁴

⁴ Willimon, 41.