



The Second Sunday in Lent February 28, 2021

“Cross Bearing”

Pastor Kirk Kerns

“Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Let us pray: Eternal God, your Son cried out in anguish from the cross, and you delivered him. Do not hide your face from those who cry out to you. By his death and resurrection bring life where there is death: feed the hungry, strengthen the weak, and break the chains of oppression, that all people may rejoice in your saving deeds through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

“Then he began to teach them.” These are the first words of our gospel for today from St. Mark. These words have puzzled me over time in that I keep thinking about Jesus just telling the disciples and what does it have to do with teaching. I looked at other translations of the Bible, other than the NRSV that we use for our scripture readings. The NIV and the New King James versions use the word teach but the Message translation by Eugene Peterson begins by saying, “He

(Jesus) then began explaining things to them.” Now explaining things seems to me to make sense. But the reality for our gospel passage for today is that Jesus is teaching the disciples what is going to happen to him and possibly to them.

This is the first of three predictions that Jesus tells the disciples. In the midst of the teaching, Jesus is letting them know what is going to happen to him but he is also letting them know what to expect for them as they continue to follow Jesus. To be a follower of Jesus is not going to be an easy thing. Peter rebukes Jesus for his words and Jesus returns his words back at Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Jesus then tells them about the cost of following him which is not an easy task.

We all know that the ways of God are different from the ways of the world. That is part and parcel of what Jesus is saying to the disciples and then to the crowds who have joined them. The Prophet Isaiah wrote, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

We are familiar with the message of Jesus’ crucifixion and that it is easy to overlook how upsetting that prospect would have been for the disciples. The

great hope of the Israelite people at that time was freedom from the Roman occupiers. They have seen Jesus' miracles, experienced his magnetic personality as they followed him, and watched him draw enthusiastic crowds. It would have been totally natural for them to assume that Jesus would somehow challenge the servility they lived under with the Romans. Everything that they had experienced with Jesus up to this time had been impressive and most likely spurred within them big hopes for the future.

But now Jesus is teaching them, contrary to their hopes and dreams that he would undergo suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders and die at their hands. One would have to say it was the worst thing that Jesus could have told them. Then there is Peter's response and Jesus rebukes him. Can one blame Peter after all that he had experienced by following Jesus? Jesus responds to Peter that he is thinking as a human being and not the way of God's teachings.

Then the shock comes after Jesus rebukes Peter when Jesus is basically telling them that the way of the cross may well be their future too. Those who would follow Jesus will have to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. As if that wasn't enough, Jesus continues with even more unexpected and totally unforeseen news: "To save your life you must lose it. You may lose your lives for Jesus' sake."

This News was contrary to what the disciples expected and made it difficult to comprehend that Jesus would have to repeat it two more times. The second time Jesus spoke of this they still did not understand him, but “were afraid to ask him.” (Mark 9:31) With what just happened to Peter, that Jesus rebuked him, they feared they would be rebuked as well.

When they were going to Jerusalem, Jesus told them yet a third time of his impending death, this time with an even more grim and graphic description, namely that he will be condemned, handed to the Gentiles, who will mock him, spit on him, flog him and kill him, but that he will rise again (Mark 10:33-34). Listening to Jesus predict this ending for him must have been the worst three days of the disciples’ time with Jesus. It was Jesus’ way of teaching them and helping them to understand that his thoughts were not their thoughts and that their ways were not Jesus’ ways.

The bottom line of our gospel for today is not that Jesus’ mission is to die, but that his faithfulness to God’s healing mission will inevitably result in his death. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus must die because his commitment to human healing will not falter. He will not change course or change his message. He is going to the cross for all of humanity throughout time.

With over two thousand years behind us, humanity has experienced many Holy Weeks. We can very easily underestimate the power of Jesus' words about his death and resurrection. Mark is essentially saying that Jesus will not back down from his mission and his ministry to save himself from the outcome of his death. Jesus will not ease his suffering along the way. Jesus' commitment to the healing of humanity literally knows no limits. And neither—Easter tells us—does God's life-giving power.

So how many of us are willing to take up our cross and follow Jesus? Lutheran theology points us to a theology of the cross and not a theology of glory. It is a difficult thing to take up our cross to follow Jesus. In its return to the Bible, the Reformation rejected the theology of glory. To follow Jesus is to live lives of service to others, to serve rather than control and dominate. It means the opposite of being proud of station and status for ourselves at the expense of others. The "theology of the cross" or to deny oneself does not mean a contrived kind of humility. We do not follow Jesus by demeaning ourselves. We are called upon to do the very best we can with the talents and abilities that God has given us. To "deny oneself" means to keep one's priorities in harmony with what Jesus told us in the two "great commandments"—love God and love neighbor.

We are living in a time of much consternation over politics and many other issues. It appears many times that people have forgotten what it means to love one another. I have a very limited following on my Facebook Page and what I do have are family and a few close friends. So many times there are posts about loving one another. A recent post spoke out against people being mean and shared this, "Life is too short to waste your time on people who don't respect, appreciate, and value you." This quote was copied from Roy T. Bennett. But I wonder if these are the very people we are to love even though they don't seem lovable.

Along life's way, we too have not loved as we are called to love. Peter and the disciples wanted what they wanted from Jesus and did not understand what Jesus was saying to them. Jesus' message is not easy to hear. We have become comfortable in our churches and find them as places of comfort and hope. We do reach out to help others when we are able to do so but do we really understand the plight of other people who are struggling with many things right now. I read this article by Ira Brent Driggers a professor at the Lutheran Theology Southern Seminary and this took me by surprise. Driggers wrote, "It is a difficult message for today's preachers to appropriate. So much of North American Christianity—especially white Christianity—has been reduced to a comfortable affiliation with

Jesus.” He went on to say, “Our tantrums against the specter of “relativism” hardly cloak the fact that there is little cost to our discipleship. Of course some Christians are persecuted in certain parts of the world.” But how many Christians in our country are persecuted in the same way?

It is important for us to consider always those who are not us. To do so means to join in Jesus’ ministry of taking up our cross and following him. It is not easy to love our neighbor as ourselves when we have marked them as not worthy. It appears that the “Hatred Meter” (My words) is running at full steam in this country right now. We stand back and we claim that what we think is correct and there is no compromise. While that is taking place, we are ignoring what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus. It is a very difficult time right now and I know it and you know it.

Maybe it’s time for us to just stop and think about what it really means to follow Jesus. One thing that is important to also remember is that Jesus says he will die at the hands of the religious authorities but he will rise again. It is in the resurrection that we find hope for our lives. So it’s time to stop and put down our own thoughts and listen to what Jesus is teaching the disciples in our gospel for today. His words are not easy to hear but they are the words that should be paid attention to. So I ask, “Are we too comfortable with our lives and our thinking?”

Jesus gives us this hope for the future, but in this passage we are called upon to follow him not just for this future but in this life. As one pastor said, “we follow Jesus not just to be saved or to go to heaven; we follow Jesus because it is worth it.” So is it worth it to follow Jesus? I hope the answer is yes even knowing it is not that easy. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, cross bearing is not an easy task for us. Help us to carry our cross for your sake in all that we do. Help us to understand that this world’s ways are not your ways many times. In this Lenten season, help us to be able to walk with you to the cross and help us to love all those that cross our path in life. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.