

Lent 2

February 28, 2021

Cross Bearing

Mark 8:31-38

They say, “You only hurt the one you love.” Every marriage partner, every person who’s ever been in deep relationship with another, knows the sad truth of that little saying. With other, more casual acquaintances, you’re polite, restrained, even reserved. With others, the tight-lipped smile appears. You exchange taut and anxious pleasantries, fulfill all social righteousness ... and then get yourself out of there.

But if it’s husband or wife, brother or sister, parent or child — then, in the sanctified privacy of your intimate relationship, you just may let the other person have it!

Maybe that’s the sort of thing Jesus is doing as he talks to Peter in this scripture passage. Jesus and this brawny fisherman have a very special friendship. They’ve traveled, together, the length and breadth of Palestine. Maybe it’s because of this special relationship that Jesus is willing to risk telling Peter the truth — the truth about his own future.

The words spill out: “great suffering ... be rejected ... be killed ... after three days rise again.” Please understand that what Peter says next, he says only out of love. Peter, Mark tells us, “began to rebuke him.”

That Greek verb Mark uses is a strong one. It's a word used elsewhere to describe the casting-out of demons, the chastisement of sinners. Peter, in other words, simply loses it.

But then, so does Jesus, immediately after. Both men are nearly beside themselves with anger. In Peter's case, it's the spontaneous outburst of a man in deep denial, who's just heard hard news he can't digest. In the case of Jesus, it's an icy-cold rage, directed at his best friend. "Get behind me, Satan!" You only hurt the one you love. How recently had Peter basked in the glow of his realization that Jesus, his beloved teacher, is the Messiah.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus had asked them all, then. With the glee of precocious schoolchildren, the disciples had shouted out their answers: "John the Baptist! ... Elijah! ... A prophet!" Peter, however, looked Jesus straight in the eye, voicing the thought none other dared speak: "You are the Messiah." From the heights to the depths. And now this. The road they're all traveling is nothing but a dead-end trail. That road ends, inevitably, at the cross.

No one seems to notice the part about rising again after three days. But can you blame them? Death, they're all too familiar with. Coming back from it three days later isn't even on the radar screen.

Then comes the clincher, the line the scholars think is the early church's summary statement of what it means to be a disciple: "If any want to become

my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

That little slogan is a marketing disaster. We all know Jesus said it, but it just doesn't make good ad copy. Would you ever print it on bumper-stickers and hand them out to potential church members? Not likely!

The fact is, this message about cross-bearing doesn't play very well in our culture: at Lent, or at any other time. William Willimon, former chaplain of Duke University and later a United Methodist bishop, once said: “Preaching of the cross is countercultural even now, perhaps especially now. We live in a culture of success, a culture where the greatest power on earth resides in ourselves and our achievements. In other words, ‘the cross is **still!**’ foolishness to those who are perishing.”

Think of our modern culture: in our pleasure-seeking cultures of having nearly everything we want, of walking into a grocery store and having dozens of flavors of cereal to choose from, of believing that the chief purpose in life is to “get ahead,” when so many of our neighbors on this planet are struggling just to get by. We just don't want to bear any kind of cross!!

Bearing the cross may be a hard image to deal with even in the church, but at least it's a familiar one. The line, “It's just the cross I have to bear,” has made its way into the culture.

Yet, most of the time we hear that phrase used, it's used improperly. People

often use it to refer to something they had absolutely no choice in — serious illness, for instance, or getting downsized out of a job or getting teased by other kids at school.

That's a far cry from Jesus' words here in the eighth chapter of Mark: "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Notice that the first thing that has to happen, here, is the disciple's willingness to take this step: "If any want to become my followers" Nobody wants to get sick or lose a job or get bullied; those things just happen. Jesus' ideal of cross-bearing is of a whole different order. It's something the disciple takes on, voluntarily.

The cross of Jesus is the cross we don't have to bear. That cross is not thrust upon us. No, we take it on for ourselves, knowing that, in so doing, we help others.

It's a wondrous thing we do, when any of us give up some scarce free time or cut loose some financial resources or make our own life just a little more difficult to make someone else's life a little easier. Maybe it's volunteering one afternoon a week in an outreach ministry, or maybe it's caring at home for a relative with Alzheimer's, 24/7, for years. Some crosses are bigger than others, but they're all cut from the same wood. They represent giving, in the very best sense.

"Self-sacrifice," taught the great preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, "is not ...

a bitter amputation of our personalities. It is the enlargement of our personalities to comprehend the interests of others.”

Finally, Jesus offers another word to his disciples: “Follow me.”

Following Jesus may have a positive association in your mind, a romantic appeal. It may call to mind a happy crowd on a sunny hillside, lunching on loaves and fishes, or a teary-eyed mother whose child has been miraculously restored to health. But consider the specific context of this saying to grasp what sort of following our Lord has in mind: “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” This is no ordinary following. It is following Jesus all the way to Calvary.

Think back to those last days of Jesus’ life: how he was stripped and beaten and given a crown of thorns. Then his tormentors laid a heavy cross upon his shoulders — his own cross, the instrument of his own death. They drove him out, then, into the streets: into a jeering, hostile crowd, who mocked him and insulted him and spat upon him.

There are times — thankfully rare, for most of us — when Christian discipleship takes us beyond self-sacrifice, beyond merely giving up some pleasure or giving of our time. There are times when the way of Jesus takes us right into hostility and hatred.

You’d have to be crazy to seek out a situation like that. Yet sometimes, in life, those situations come. It’s as Martin Luther used to advise his students: “God

does not want us to search for misfortune and to choose it ourselves. Walk in faith and love, Luther said. If the cross comes, accept it. If it does not come, do not search for it.”

Sometimes faith is not so much a labor, but a risk. When those situations do present themselves, in your life or in mine, may we look to our Lord to find some measure of courage, so as to be able to follow his way — and to bear witness, thereby, to the meaning of what our Savior has already done for us.

Amen!