



Liturgical Day: The Second Sunday in Lent

Date: March 8, 2009

Sermon Title: The Cross-Shaped Life

Suffering and death,
Take up your cross and follow,
Lose life to save it.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This is an important Gospel lesson. We are studying *The Gospel According to St. Mark* this year, and the eighth chapter is one of the key sections if you want to understand what St. Mark has to offer. It is a significant transition chapter – beginning with Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah, and continuing with Jesus’ prediction of what will happen when he arrives in Jerusalem, the tone and direction of St. Mark’s account shifts dramatically. From here on out, Jesus is clearly headed towards Jerusalem. From here on out, he is outspoken about his fate. From here on out, his words get harder to understand, and harder to embrace.

In this morning’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is teaching about the trials that will come for him. Eventually, he says to his disciples (in verses 34 and 35):

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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.

How can the disciples possibly have any idea what Jesus is talking about? Deny yourself? Take up your cross to follow Jesus? Lose your life, if you try to save it? Save your life if you lose it for Jesus? There are certainly times when the disciples leave Jesus, shaking their heads, and wondering what in the world he is talking about.

In this instance, that has to be the case: they hadn’t seen Jesus’ crucified – there is only one possible meaning the cross could have had for them at this point in the story: the cross was what Roman authorities used to punish the worst of all criminals – those who were the greatest threat to the state. The cross was a symbol of treason; of violent murder; of the importance of obeying the Roman state no matter what. I can’t imagine how a single one of those disciples can have had any idea what Jesus is talking about when he says: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

The disciples’ can’t understand what he means at this point on the story. And that is perhaps one of the greatest differences between them and us. We’ve heard the story, and know how it ends. We try, during this season of Lent, to take the focus off of what eventually happened in Jerusalem. We try, for forty days, to live as though we don’t know how everything turns out, as we follow his journey towards Jerusalem for the last time. But the truth is always there: when Jesus talks about his cross, we know exactly what he means. We know that he will die in Jerusalem. And we know that he will rise in Jerusalem. We know that his life will give the cross a meaning that is quite different than the one Roman soldiers and politicians gave to it. The cross will become a sign of hope and life for millions of believers throughout the years.

It is hard for us to identify with these first century believers, because we know the story so well. But how about what he says to us? We know

FIRST LESSON

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16

PSALM

PSALM 22:23-31

SECOND LESSON

ROMANS 4:13-25

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MARK 8:31-38

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O GOD, BY THE PASSION
OF YOUR BLESSED SON YOU
MADE AN INSTRUMENT OF
SHAMEFUL DEATH TO BE FOR
US THE MEANS OF LIFE.
GRANT US SO TO GLORY IN
THE CROSS OF CHRIST THAT
WE MAY GLADLY SUFFER
SHAME AND LOSS FOR THE
SAKE OF YOUR SON, JESUS
CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND
LORD, WHO LIVES AND
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

9300 E. BELLEVIEW AVE.
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,
COLORADO 80111

VOICE

(303) 770-9300

FAX

(303) 770-9301

WEB

WWW.STPLC.ORG



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

that for Jesus, picking up the cross meant death on a cross at Golgotha. But what does it mean for us? What does it mean for someone in our time, living in our community, and having the kind of life that most of us live – what does it mean for someone like us to take up a cross and follow Jesus? These are hard questions for Christians of our time to answer. And, as a matter of fact, the question itself may be as foreign to us, as *cross-talk* was to Jesus' disciples. There have been very few Christian martyrs in the United States. Even if we wanted to, it would be hard to get someone to crucify us for our faith. Jesus may not be calling us to a literal death for our faith. But he is calling us to die for our faith. He is calling us to experience life in the exactly opposite way from how we've been trained to experience life. We are, in this society, consumers above all things – even in these difficult economic times. Some of us are very well-educated consumers. We ask questions like: Which food is the healthiest for my family? Which school is the best for my kids? Which neighborhood is the best one to live in? Which sporting organization will best help my child to strengthen and mature? We even end up asking, "Which church will best meet my needs, or my family's needs?"

If we consider this mindset from the perspective of this morning's text, though, that may be exactly the wrong question to ask. Jesus teaches us that the essence of life lived in his name is not all about how we can make our own individual or family lives richer – asking questions like: which church offers the best youth program, or best worship service, or best educational opportunities. Instead, he would have us ask which church offers us the best opportunity to put our gifts to work for the kingdom of God. He would have us ask which church is most in need of the gifts we've been given. He would have us ask which church will do the best job of helping us to give of ourselves, in order to make a difference in the lives of others.

That is the stewardship Jesus demands of his followers. If you have any desire of following him, he says, pick up your cross, deny yourself, be willing to lose even life itself in the attempt to follow him. Because only in that manner are we able to experience what life truly has to offer us.

I heard about a pastor this past week who has a strange way of speaking about what it means to be involved in his church. The conversation I heard went something like this: he met a couple at a party who had just moved to his community and were looking for a church home. "Tell us about your church," they said, "we might be interested." Of course, what they meant by that was, tell us about your programs, your activities, your facilities – what do you have to offer us, in other words? How does your church compare with the others we've visited? This pastor smiled and said, "Oh, you'll love our church. If you come to our church, we'll kill you."

Well, that wasn't exactly what the couple was expecting to hear. At first, they were stunned and speechless. Finally, the woman chuckled politely and said, "I assume you're kidding." The pastor said, "Not at all." Then he went on to explain that to follow Jesus Christ is not to add another bullet to your résumé, but to give up self-interest in pursuit of Christ's kingdom on earth, that the church is not a shopping mall where you pick up the things you need, but a mission outpost from which you go out in service to Christ and his kingdom. He never said if the couple joined his church or not.ⁱ

That pastor was right: in order to live, first you have to die. That's the ultimate cost of discipleship. What Jesus is doing in this morning's Gospel, is attempting to redirect our attention. He tells us that if we allow ourselves to stay focused on our own selves, our own families, our own jobs, our own cities, our own nations – if our focus is always inward, we'll never experience the life he has to offer us. But if we are bold enough, and faithful enough, to become aware of the needs that surround us, and to give of ourselves in order to touch those needs – in that is found a richness of life that can be experienced in no other way. It is only in picking up our crosses, that we'll actually find ourselves following Jesus. It is only in giving of ourselves to others, that we actually find the life that he wants us to know.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (March 8, 2009)

ⁱ From Dr. Sarah Henrich, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN; posted on www.workingpreacher.org.

Gospel Lesson; English Text:

^{8:31} 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." ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{8:31} Καὶ ῥξατο διδάσκειν αὐτοὺς τι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου πολλὰ παθεῖν καὶ ἀποδοκιμασθῆναι ὑπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων καὶ τῶν ἀρχιερέων καὶ τῶν γραμματέων καὶ ἀποκτανθῆναι καὶ μετὰ τρεῖς ἡμέρας ἀναστῆναι ³² καὶ παρρησίᾳ τὸν λόγον ἐλάλει. καὶ προσλαβόμενος ὁ Πέτρος αὐτὸν ῥξατο ἐπιτιμᾶν αὐτῷ. ³³ ὁ δὲ ἐπιστραφεὶς καὶ ἰδὼν τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ ἐπετίμησεν Πέτρῳ καὶ λέγει παγε ὀπίσω μου, σατανᾶ, ὅτι οὐ φρονεῖς τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ ἀλλὰ τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων. ³⁴ Καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος τὸν χλον σὺν τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς εε τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι. ³⁵ ὅς γὰρ ἐὰν θέλη τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ σῶσαι ἀπολέσει αὐτήν ς δ' ἂν ἀπολέσει τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ νεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου σώσει αὐτήν. ³⁶ τί γὰρ ὠφελεῖ νθρωπον κερδησαι τὸν κόσμον λον καὶ ζημιωθῆναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ; ³⁷ τί γὰρ δοῖ νθρωπος ἀντάλλαγμα τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ; ³⁸ ὅς γὰρ ἐὰν ἐπαισχυνθῆ με καὶ τοὺς ἐμοὺς λόγους ἐν τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ τῇ μοιχαλίδι καὶ ἀμαρτωλῷ, καὶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐπαισχυνθήσεται αὐτόν, ὅταν λθη ἐν τῇ δόξῃ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ἀγγέλων τῶν ἁγίων. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱ St. Mark 8:31-38, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Mark 8:31-38, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).