

The Way of the Cross

Mark 8:27-38

September 17, 2006

I.

Today's gospel reading contains two levels of difficulty. One is implicit, and is inherent in the setting in which Jesus spoke the words that St. Mark recorded. The other is explicit, and is evident in the harsh and demanding things that Jesus told Peter and the disciples.

The implicit difficulty is trying to understand why Jesus took the disciples to Caesarea Philippi in the first place. That's a long way from Galilee, and even on modern roads the trip can take two hours by car. It also was a staging area at the time for Roman troops, there was an active pagan shrine nearby, and Jewish prisoners had been brought there to be tortured and executed.

But yet that is where Jesus chose to go, and it marked a crucial and theologically significant transition in his ministry that helps explain the explicit difficulties in the reading.

Prior to the events we heard described today, Jesus carried out a ministry of healing and teaching in and around Galilee, a relatively safe place for him. After today's events, he began his fateful Journey to Jerusalem and the cross, and the dangers increased. And during this trip, he spoke principally to the increasing number of disciples who accompanied him rather than to the crowds that appeared along the way.

Some of the things he said to them do not reflect the gentle and compassionate Jesus we learned about in Sunday School. Today's reading, a good example of that, seems not to display Jesus' love for humanity or the kindness and goodness he extended to others.

Instead, today we see a defiant and forceful Jesus who spoke harshly to Peter right after Peter had just acknowledged that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Then, not stopping there, Jesus set forth a series of seemingly impossible standards of discipleship and salvation.

You must deny yourself, he said, and pick up your cross. Try to save your life and you will lose it. If you seek worldly goods you will lose eternity. If you are ashamed of me now, I will be ashamed of you later. What was behind these apparent ultimatums? How did Jesus intend them then, and how are we to understand them today?

II.

These verses we just heard have three parts that set forth the fundamental message of Mark's Gospel, and they are organized in an orderly way that, centuries later, can offer us guidance.

The first of the three parts is Jesus' question about who he is. If we correctly answer that question then we are called to the second part, which is to take up our crosses and follow him. But for those who do not do so, or who do it in a self-serving or unrighteous way, then the third part describes the consequences of that failure in terms of eternal separation from God.

In a nutshell, today's Gospel tells us that if we believe, then here is what we are called to do, and if we don't do it, here is what happens. So for us, we who do believe, the central part of today's Gospel is part about what we are called to do. It is the injunction to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow Jesus.

III.

What did Jesus mean when he said "if anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"? Some people, even though they attend church

regularly and profess the faith, simply disregard parts of the Gospels that contain harsh or inflexible teachings. There is a type of Jesus they can accept, but there also is a view of Jesus that just does not fit their own purposes or expectations.

This has been referred to as "salad bar spirituality." You know how a salad bar works. You make your salad, select the toppings and dressing you like, and just pass over the things that don't seem as appealing to you. Some people look at faith the same way. They create a taste-good, feel-good religion that has all of the things they like without any of the uncomfortable ideas that are part of some important biblical teachings.

For those who adopt this brand of postmodern Christianity, religion has become a consumer item. If you like it, buy it. If not, leave it on the shelf. If it works for you, that's all that counts.

In this respect I'm reminded of a play I saw at a church during its Lenten program where a brief dramatic production set the stage for a homily or teaching on the play. It was called *The Discipleship Store*, and was about a place where people who wanted to be disciples could go in and pick up the things they needed.

The play had three acts, and in the final act one of the customers had read today's passage from Mark, and so he went to the store looking for a cross. The first thing he asked for was if they had any padded crosses; he didn't want it to be too uncomfortable. When he was told that there were none, he asked if he could get a cross that wasn't too big; one that would fit under his coat. "Can't be too obvious about these things," he said. And when told that was not possible, he asked if any crosses came with carrying cases that would make them easier to lift, or a stand he could put it in when he wanted to set it down for a while.

Then while he continued to talk with the clerk, the sound faded, the lights dimmed, the Rector came on stage with the spotlight on him, and he used the play as the setting to give a Lenten homily on the true way of the cross.

And the basic message was that we must fully bring Jesus into our lives with no reservations or conditions. We live the Christian life all the time, in every way; not just when it's convenient, or in some of the ways.

You might have heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a respected German theologian who was executed by the Nazis because he would not tailor his teaching to their wishes, and refused to join the lukewarm pastors who supported Hitler.

He referred to this part-way Christianity as "cheap grace," and said, "cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance. Cheap grace is baptism without church discipleship. It is communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is what the world offers, it is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross. Cheap grace is grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

In essence, this type of faith and spirituality creates a false sense of piety and intimacy with God because it requires no effort, and there is no accountability. There is no need to submit to anything that might be inconvenient, and there is no call to live a life that truly places God first instead of ourselves first.

IV.

For Christians living in America in the twenty-first century, placing God first is the message of today's reading. Although the principles inherent in the idea of taking up the cross are unchanged over the centuries, the circumstances are different.

Christians no longer are persecuted in America as they were in first century Palestine. We do not live under the ruthless domination of an occupying power such as the Romans. Danger is gone, but discipleship remains. Oppression is history, but obedience abides. The cross no longer is a threat but rather the source of our eternal hope.

Today we sometimes think the cross represents a burden we bear, or some tragedy we experience, or a chronic illness, or physical handicap. If someone tells us that they have a cross to bear, we might regard that in a negative way, and be thankful that we do not have their problem.

That is not what Jesus meant. For him the cross meant getting our priorities straight. Jesus must be our first priority. And when we accept him into our lives, we accept him just as he accepted the cross for us, and we stand before God justified through Jesus' righteousness.

V.

But putting Jesus first does not mean we must give up all our material possessions, or our jobs, or our recreation, or our families. Rather, it means that we cannot place them above him. Some people say we must deny the world to be Christians. That is wrong. Merely giving up things does not make a person Christian. Buddhist monks and other so-called back-to-nature religions do that.

What we do must be done in right way, and for the right reasons. We don't have to sell our homes or take vows of poverty, although some people are called to a monastic life. For most of us, however, what we must give up are the things that interfere with our relationship with God, that deny Christ as our savior, or that get in the way of the Holy Spirit acting in our lives.

Faithful Christianity is not inconsistent with comfort, so long as our comfort does not take precedence over our Christian duties to love God, to love each other, and to care for those in need. And denying ourselves is not inconsistent with prosperity so long as we use our prosperity in righteous ways.

St. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy that the love of money is the root of all evil. The key words, however, are "love of money," not "possession of money." There is nothing wrong with wealth and resources so long as we are good stewards of our wealth and resources. And when we put God first and let him govern our lives, then we are good stewards and we do take up our cross.

My words, however, are not intended to minimize what it takes to place God first. When Jesus took his disciples to Caesarea Philippi he was not just leading them on a nice afternoon walk. Just as he was preparing them to go into the world, we also are called to prepare ourselves for the coming kingdom. And it takes more than a few minor adjustments in our lives to do that. The bottom line is that God comes first, before everything else.

VI.

So how do we put Jesus first? In many ways we are being asked to do things that are not part of our human nature. It is not normal for many of us to deny ourselves. It is not easy for many of us to develop spiritual disciplines. Many of us are not accustomed to putting others ahead of ourselves. And it certainly is not natural to give away things when we have worked so hard to obtain them.

But that is what we are called to do. And though prayer, and the study of Scripture, and living together in a community of faith, and following the leading of the Holy Spirit, God will show us the way. He will not burden us with more than we can bear, and he will guide us to what is best for us. If we truly seek him in prayer and faith, he will not let us down.

If we do this, we can find that taking up the cross is not a burden, but a joy. And following Jesus is not a task to be dreaded, but rather a way of life that fills us with a peace that lightens our loads instead of making them heavier.

I recall the story, an old, old story, about the farmer who was walking down the road with a sack of wheat. Coming the other way he saw the king's carriage being drawn by four magnificent horses. As they passed, the king stopped and spoke to the farmer. He asked what was in the bag, and the farmer replied that it was wheat from his farm.

The king asked the farmer if he could have some of his wheat. Well, this wheat was precious to the farmer and he didn't want to give it up, but he didn't want to deny the king. So he reached into his bag, took out five grains, and gave it to the king. The king thanked him, and then the king reached into a bag in his carriage, pulled out five gold coins, gave them to the farmer, and drove away.

As the farmer watched the king disappear into the distance, he wondered, what would have happened if I had given him the entire bag?

What indeed? We are called by today's gospel to put God first and ourselves and others second. That is the nature of the denial that Jesus described. We cannot be first. And when we are called to take up the cross, we always must always be willing to make unselfish sacrifices for others just as Jesus sacrificed himself for us. Such is the nature of discipleship. Such is the nature of stewardship. Such is the nature of the Christian life. *Amen.*