

Comfort Of The Cross

Mark 8:31-38

March 4, 2012

I.

The 2012 presidential campaign is in the news every day, isn't it? We've had more debates than ever before, and we've heard a lot of promises, accusations, and speeches.

Imagine one of those candidates said, "Vote for me. I will increase taxes, cut social security benefits, and do all I can to raise prices." And then suppose he said, "If you don't vote for me, I won't help you when I am elected."

What would we think about that? Would we vote for that candidate? I doubt it. That candidate would not be telling us what we want to hear, and we probably would think he made a big mistake with what he said.

Now look at today's Gospel. Was Jesus telling people what they wanted to hear? He said that his followers must deny themselves and take up their crosses. He told them they had to lose their lives in order to save them. If they seek the world now they lose eternity later. And finally, he said he would reject those who reject him.

Was Jesus making the same mistake as our imaginary candidate? I don't think so. And perhaps a story can help set the stage. A family from an extremely rural area was making its first visit to the big city. The father and son went into a hotel while the rest of the family was outside.

Then the father and son walked past the elevators. They never had seen an elevator before, and didn't know what it was or how it worked. Just then an elderly lady with a cane hobbled toward the elevator, pressed the button and went inside. The door closed. They just stared in amazement.

About a minute later they still were staring at the elevator door when it opened and out came a very attractive good-looking young woman. The father was dumbstruck, and without missing a beat turned to his son, and said, "Quick, go get your mother."

The father did not understand what he saw, did he? And the moral of this story is that sometimes it's easy to draw the wrong conclusion from the facts and information right in front of us. We can miss the message.

II.

And missing the message certainly is possible with today's Gospel. Elsewhere in the Bible Jesus said comforting things. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt. 6:33). "Come unto me, all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). Was Jesus sending conflicting signals today?

That sometimes happens with our kids, doesn't it? We tell them we love them, and then say things they think are harsh and not very loving. But we know that we do it for their own good.

Today's Gospel is the same. It's not a warm and fuzzy message for the world. These probably are not the words of Jesus we would use to invite someone to come to church for the first time. They don't reflect the gentle and compassionate Jesus we learned about in Sunday School.

But they do explain how the Gospel works. If we believe, then here is what we are called to do, and if we don't do it, then here is what happens. And for some people these words might be like hearing someone scrape their fingernails on the blackboard. But if we accept Jesus Christ, today's Gospel can be reassuring. Rather than being a threat it can reaffirm our hope.

III.

Let's start with Jesus' first point. He told people to take up their crosses and follow him. This is strong language. At the time it easily could have been misunderstood. In first century Palestine the cross was a very real instrument of Roman persecution and death.

And even today the term "cross" can have unpleasant connotations. A cross can refer to a burden, or a tragedy, or an illness or handicap. If someone says they have a cross to bear we might regard that in a negative way, and be thankful we do not have their problem.

But I don't think Jesus meant it in that way. That's partly because we sometimes hear Jesus' words across the centuries from a different culture and a different time with images and metaphors unlike those we might use.

Jesus was not describing a cross that is forced upon us, as it soon would be forced upon him, but rather an intentional Christian discipline we willingly accept as a way of life. We want to love God and our neighbors. We try to help other people and make our community a better place. We choose to gather as a parish family in the church, and through the church grow in God's grace.

So the cross is not a burden but a blessing. The cross supports us and holds us up rather than weighing us down. And taking up our cross means getting our priorities straight. Our Lord and Savior is first and we are number two.

And Jesus also said we must deny ourselves. This conveys the same idea, and you probably instinctively understand it. We know there are things in the world, and about the world, we should avoid. We know there are spiritual things that are incompatible with worldly things, and I'm not even going to try to list them. We will recognize them if we have our cross with us.

Jesus simply calls us to do things for the right reasons. We do not have to give up our jobs, or possessions, or activities. Rather, we just cannot put them above what Jesus calls us to be.

This leads to the last two things Jesus said. If we try to save our lives we will lose them, but if we lose our lives for his sake we will save them. And finally, he will turn away from all who turn away from him. Again, he spoke emphatically so there would be no confusion.

And again the theme is the same. Those who put themselves first are lost, and those who put Jesus first are saved. That is the essence of the Good News of the Gospel.

IV.

But sometimes following Jesus is easier said than done. Parts of the road to discipleship are full of potholes. Other parts are under construction. Christian commitment is not a casual thing.

That's because Jesus did not die on the cross simply because he was suggesting a few changes here and a few changes there, but rather because he proclaimed God's kingdom as a new world order that would replace existing power structures.

And when Jesus led his disciples to Jerusalem he was not taking them on a pleasant afternoon walk, but was bringing them into the dangers of conspiracies and plots intended to end his life and remove the threat he posed.

Finally, he does not call us to follow him just so we can be nicer people, but rather so we can be different people. St. Paul said that if we are in Christ we are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). Accepting discipleship in Christ means more than making a few adjustments at our own convenience. When we are in Christ we are transformed and our priorities are changed.

And the seriousness with which Jesus spoke today makes clear that the choice is not between two options of comparable value. It's not like deciding whether to go to Hula's or the country club for dinner. It's not like choosing between a red shirt or a blue shirt.

We simultaneously live in the secular world, and in the presence of the spiritual world. And the secular world is the default option. It's what we get by doing nothing. We have to consciously choose to overcome the secular world in order to partake of the spiritual world.

And I think we know what that entails. As Christians we know what we are called to do, and we know if we are not doing it. But we all can be inattentive to our spiritual commitments. We all can be overwhelmed with the concerns of the here and now rather than the hereafter.

That's certainly true for me. There are days when I begin the morning convinced that I am a good Christian and know what Jesus wants from me. The world is a beautiful place, prospects for the day are good, and nothing bad has happened. The sun is shining and the birds are singing. I'm optimistic and confident. All is going well. Then I have to get out of bed.

And that's when the world creeps in and Murphy's law lurks nearby. But fortunately we are not left to deal with the world on our own. Most of us cannot do it alone. We do it in faith with each other. That's why we have the church and why we have our community here at St. Thomas.

Through the church we can hear God's word, we can support and encourage friends and family, and we can carry our crosses in a comforting way. And we find that following Jesus is not a task to be dreaded, but rather a way of life that fills us with peace and lightens our load.

V.

There is an old story about a farmer walking down the road with a sack of wheat. And he saw the king's carriage drawn by four magnificent horses coming toward him. As they passed, the king stopped and asked what was in the bag. The farmer replied it was wheat from his farm.

The king asked if he could have some of the farmer's 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 took five little grains from his bag and handed them over. The king thanked him, and then reached into a large 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 he had given him all of his wheat.

What indeed? That's the point. We give ourselves completely to the king. We give him the whole bag knowing that we put our Lord and Savior first and ourselves second. That's what it means to deny ourselves. That's what it means to take up the cross. It's what it means to be part of a church family. And when we live in that way we will be blessed.

I have said before that I never knew anyone who, on their deathbed, believed they spent too much time in church. It usually is the opposite. So, how do we think of our time at St. Thomas?

I pray that our worship here can help us be faithful to Jesus' words in today's Gospel. I pray that the church can help us know the blessings of that faith. And I am confident that through our lives together at St. Thomas we can see today's reading as a joy rather than a burden. *Amen.*