

October 1, 2006
Pentecost 17

“Jesus Speaks about Bearing the Cross”

MARK 8:27-35

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”²⁸ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”²⁹ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ.”³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Jesus had a way of drawing large crowds of people around him. It was not just the miracles that drew the crowds. It was his love and compassion he had for people, and the kind words he spoke to them. Mothers brought their little children to Jesus so he would bless them. Even as a young man in Nazareth Jesus was popular with people. His love and compassion for them was pure and perfect.

The crowds became smaller and smaller when Jesus began to teach about his purpose for coming into this world and his future death on the cross. The more he talked about his suffering, death and resurrection, the more the people turned against him and walked away.

It is still the same today. People come in large numbers to places where Jesus is set forth to help you discover what one church calls, “the champion in you.” “Give us something we can take home with us that is practical for every day living. Enough of that talk about sin and Jesus dying for us!” Those who faithfully witness to Christ and to him crucified see people turning away just like they might turn away from food that has become spoiled in the fridge.

Today we are going to join the disciples sitting at Jesus’ feet learning, learning, learning, always learning. They listened to him as he talked plainly about the cross on which he would die. They listened to him as he talked plainly about the crosses they would carry for him.

Jesus talked plainly about his cross

It tells us that Jesus was walking along with his disciples. Some of the happiest moments in life come when we walk with people and share the deepest thoughts we have with each other. Jesus asked the all-important question of life, the most important question you can

ever ask another human being. "Who do people say that I am?" This question is not like some of the tests you take in school that have a true or false answer, or tests that have multiple choices, a, b, or c. This was a thought question that required them to think about what other people were saying about Jesus.

The disciples don't seem to have a problem answering this all important question about what people believed about Jesus. They heard people saying Jesus might be John the Baptist come back to life again after he was killed by King Herod. Others suggested he was the prophet Elijah who went up to heaven in a chariot of fire now come back down to the earth. And still others were saying Jesus was probably a great prophet similar to people like Moses, or Isaiah or Jeremiah. Notice what they do not say. Few people it appears were actually confessing Jesus Christ as their Lord and God.

Talk to people on the street. Listen to what is said on television and written in the newspaper. Interview kids on a college campus. Ask the all-important question of life, "Who do you believe Jesus Christ is?" Most would admit he was an important person in history, a great teacher, someone who can help you live a better life. Others might think he was a just a legend that developed in the early church. I once knew a lady who believed Jesus was a great guru who could help people channel themselves and get connected to the power source of the universe, similar to Obi-Won Kenobi who helped Luke Skywalker get more in touch with his feelings and more connected to the power of the Force.

Here is the personal question Jesus asked the disciples and also asks each of us here this morning: "But what about you?" "Who do you say that I am?" Peter does not hesitate. He jumps at the opportunity to give an answer like the eager kid in school is always the first to raise his hand. Peter joyfully proclaims, "You are the Christ." In Matthew's account we hear him say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It was because of that powerful confession of faith that Jesus changed his name from Simon to "The Rock." "The Rock." "Rocky?" Can't you hear the music playing? Jesus plan was to build his church on the kind of faith that Peter confessed. "You are the Christ!"

Today you are sitting here as miracles of God's grace and love to you. With Peter you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Lord and God from all eternity, equal with the Father and the Spirit. This amazing faith did not spring up in you because of who you are, or what you did, or what your parents did. This faith is purely a gift of God's undeserved love and kindness. It frames your whole life. It is with you wherever you go. It makes you what you are. It is the reason for your whole existence.

It is not enough to know who Jesus is to be saved. You also need to know what he did to save you and rescue. Jesus takes the beautiful confession of Peter and plainly teaches them what is going to happen to him on the cross. "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days." It says Jesus spoke plainly about this. Oh, that does not mean Jesus never talked about this before. Now he makes it plain, clear, crystal clear what is going to happen to him. He starts talking in graphic terms about the cross, about blood, about suffering and pain.

Have you ever talked to someone who described a surgery to you in such graphic detail

that you almost felt your knees growing weak? We feel like saying, "Spare me the gory details." Jesus did not spare the gory details about the cross for his disciples. He wanted them to know the pain he would undergo for their sins. Later after his resurrection he would spend even more time with them showing them from the Old Testament how these details were predicted in such words as, "He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities."

Critics of the Bible say that Jesus probably never spoke these words to his disciples because they didn't get the message when Jesus finally went up to the cross. They say people put these words in here and Jesus never really spoke them. Peter could not stand thinking about Jesus dying. He told him to stop talking about it. Everything inside of us wants a Jesus who is a good friend, a good example, a good leader, or good motivator. We don't want a Jesus who dies for us because we are born minimizing the problem of sin inside of us and maximizing our ability to cope with life on our own including making ourselves right with God.

There are lots of problems in our world today. It is so hard to hear about the people being killed by the hundreds every week in Baghdad. It is hard to hear about families where there are huge problems that almost seem insurmountable. It is hard to hear about people taking drugs and abusing the use of alcohol. It would have been so easy for Jesus to listen to the devil when he promised him all the kingdoms of the world or listen to Peter trying to discourage him. This was also a temptation from the devil. Imagine what Jesus could do if he used his power to cure aids in Africa, wipe out the poppy fields in Afghanistan, or cocaine bushes in South America. The greatest problem in the world is our broken relationship with God, falling short of his glory in everything we do. For that only the cross will remove the problem, the cross on which Jesus died for all. As Jesus said, "The Son of Man is come to seek and save that which is lost." By lost he meant lost eternal in sin.

He spoke plainly about your cross

It cost you nothing to become a Christian, but it will cost you everything to live as a Christian here in this life before the Lord calls you home. Standing up for the cross of Jesus will subject you to pain and ridicule of the highest level. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."

The word "deny" is a strong word. It was also used for Peter denying Jesus, even cursing and swearing he never knew him. Because of what Jesus did on the cross, you begin to deny everything inside of you that hints or suggests that people might do something to save themselves, or that other religions can offer people some hope of salvation. Because you are forgiven in Christ you want to lose everything in your life that pulls you away from that forgiveness. When you see evil things pop up in your life you immediately want to get rid of them so that your tolerance of evil does not take away the cross. And when material blessings come your way in abundance, you plead for strength that these things do not become more important than Jesus. With John the Baptist you joyfully proclaim, "He must increase, and I must decrease."

Last Sunday my wife and I went to Pismo Beach. We took a long walk along the beach and we saw this strange man once again. He is about 70 years old, I would guess. He walks not just with his feet but with his hands and feet. His body twists and turns as he walks along. Every moment is painful. People look at this poor man with this tortured body. Then they see the crosses, one cross around the neck and another around his waist. They stop, they look, they stare in amazement. What is this man doing? He is trying to make up for something he has done wrong?

In 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul tells us that we bear around in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ, but not in a strange way. We carry the cross with us wherever we go as the source of our salvation and the hope of salvation for other people. We long for other people to share this hope that is ours. Several years ago in Bible camp we had a project that had a piece of wood cut from a log with a cross on it, some grass and stones. On the stones were glued eyes that looked up longingly to the cross. That's what we want for all people. That's what we want for the Muslim people, and the people in India, and the people in our neighborhoods and in our families. We want them to know about Jesus and his death on the cross. We want him to use us, and our bodies, and our lives to let the world see the crucified Jesus Christ through us. As we sing the hymn, "Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, Till all the world adore his holy name." Amen.