

March 8, 2009
Lent 2

“Jesus Talks Plainly About the Cross”

MARK 8:31-38

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. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

It stands out in history as one of the most horrific forms of torture known to the human race. We are not talking about the rack invented by the Spanish Inquisition that tore a body apart by its limbs. We are not talking about the electric shock used to coerce people to give information. We are not talking about the water board and other types of torture that bring a person to the brink of drowning. We are talking this morning about the cross, that instrument of torture used primarily by the Roman government to keep slaves and rebellious criminals in line. Wikipedia defines crucifixion as “an ancient method of execution whereby the condemned person is tied or nailed to a large wooden cross and left to hang until dead.”

Today we worship in a church building in front of this ancient symbol of horrific torture. We wear crosses in chains around our necks, and sing hymns about the cross such as “Jesus I My Cross Have Taken” and “Lift High the Cross.” You see, it is on the arms of this instrument of torture that Jesus God’s Son our Savior died, and it is on this cross that Jesus made a full payment for the sin of the world. This morning we want to look more closely at these words of Jesus where he spoke plainly about the cross he would bear for us, and also the crosses we would bear for him.

He spoke plainly about the cross he would bear for us

Jesus spoke plainly about dying on the cross for us. “He 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.” Jesus did not mumble or spoke softly or even in a euphemistic way about this suffering death so as to not frighten his disciples. He spoke in specific terms about suffering many things, being rejected by his own people, being killed and rising again. Jesus could even draw on the words from Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah to make it even clearer to his disciples:

“He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised our iniquity.”

It frightened the disciples to hear Jesus speak so plainly about the cross. He even appeared eager to get the job done. In fact the book of Hebrews tells us, “For the joy set before him he endured the cross and the shame.” Peter could not handle this cross talk and the eagerness he saw on Jesus face. It was too real. We are told he “rebuked Jesus.” Jesus saw this as a temptation from the devil. He told Peter plainly, “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of man.”

When we talk to people about what happened on the cross, it may make them feel uncomfortable because like Peter they do not have in mind the things of God but of man. It is more natural for us to think that there is something we can do with our lives to remove the things we do wrong from God’s sight so they will not be held against us on judgment. The Apostle Paul spoke of the challenge of being faithful to the proclamation of the cross with these words, “But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Then he goes on to describe how the cross becomes the source of salvation and the ultimate wisdom of God for those who believe. “But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

A few years ago Dr. Laura, a convert to Judaism, explained to her radio audience her understanding of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. She described how you need to find someone you have hurt or offended, make amends or atonement with them, and use that to provide what you need to put yourself in the right relationship with God. If only someone had called in and explained to her how God in his wisdom established the day of atonement as the day on which the high priest sprinkled blood on the gold cover of the ark of covenant, picturing and foreshadowing the blood of Jesus that would be expended on the cross for our sins.

One person describes this natural religion that is offended by the cross as a “kitty box religion.” We know what the kitty does in the box as it digs a hole, and then covers the foul smell with kitty litter so that it cannot be seen or smelled. Human beings are born into this world embedded with the thinking that sin can be covered by good deeds and the foul smell removed. How alarming it is to discover from the Bible that even the good we do, our goodness or righteousness, is like filthy rags in the sight of God. Only in the cross of Jesus do we have any hope of removing the sin that will be held against us on judgment day.

We find so much comfort in these words, “Jesus spoke plainly.” You see Satan speaks also plainly and accuses us before God’s throne day and night. He is able to set forth the things I have wrong this past week in the most graphic detail and he does not need a digital camera with 10 mega pixels of resolution. The other day I was standing in line at Radio Shack and a man was buying a little SD card for his camera that held 8 gigabytes of information, enough not only to take thousands of pictures, but also to use the camera as a video recorder. Satan is sure good at recording what we do wrong and then accusing us before God and also accusing us personally. What a comfort to hear how Jesus spoke plainly about what he would do for us on the cross. We have plain and simple words from our second lesson for today, “But God demonstrates his own love toward us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us.” We have the comforting and simple words of 1 John 1 that tell us, “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from ALL sin.” Simply plain language, so clear, such as Psalm 103, “He has removed our guilt from us as far as the

east is from the west.”

He spoke plainly about the crosses we will carry for him

Jesus also spoke plainly about the crosses we will carry for him. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” To follow Jesus means denying yourself by turning your back on all attempts to try and rescue yourself. It means turning away from this natural religion, this “kitty box” religion of justifying sin and putting up with it in our lives.

In your baptism you were connected to Christ, including his death on the cross and his resurrection. In fact Romans 6 says these remarkable words about our baptism, “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.” I am holding in my hand a cross that my sister gave years ago. It shows the body of Jesus still on the cross. Through your baptism and the faith given to by the Holy Spirit you can look at the cross and say, “That’s me hanging there with Jesus.” It allows us to deny ourselves, and actually despise and loathe any hope of saving ourselves. That is what Jesus meant by losing our lives. That is part of bearing the cross for him.

Have you ever heard someone described as OC? OC stands for obsessive compulsive. It is OK to turn around as your drive down the block to check if you closed the garage door when you backed out of your garage on the way to work. But if you do that three times that is example of being obsessive compulsive. The Christian is someone who is not OC but CO, cross obsessive. Because my life is with Jesus on the cross, I want to get rid of anything in my life that would separate me from Jesus. Jesus described this new life of following him in this way, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for me and for the sake of the gospel will save it.” Listen to what the Apostle Paul said in Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Jesus explains even more plainly what it means to carry our cross for him when he says, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul? Or, what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” We have seen what greed has done for the financial markets of the world. We have seen what greed has done to our personal finances. All the money in the latest bailout programs cannot pay for one sin. As Martin Luther said in his catechism, “Christ has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from sin, death and the power of the devil, not with gold and silver, but with his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death.” Every day we carry a cross for Jesus as we look at what has happened to our money, our jobs or our equity in our homes. We are challenged to remember that in Jesus we are still the richest people in the world, redeemed by his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death. That’s what really counts.

Finally Jesus pleads with us to not be ashamed to carry the cross for him, even it means being treated like dirt and scum. “If anyone is ashamed of me my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

A 13 year-old boy was ashamed of his mom. She always came to school to help with school lunch, sat in the stands and cheered at sporting events, picked him up after class. She had once been pretty, but scars, nasty scars covered one side of her face. He could hear other kids whisper, "What happened to her?" One day he asked her to stop coming. She knew the time had come to tell him the story of how her face was badly burned. One night thirteen years earlier, she woke up and smelled smoke. The hallway to the nursery was in flames. She ran into the nursery, grabbed her little baby, wrapped him in a blanket and rushed through the flames, getting badly burned in the process. He looked at the scars on his mother's face. The evidence of her love for him, and tears started streaming down his face.

So it is for us this morning. When we look at the cross and listen to Jesus talk plainly to us we are moved to tears of joy that he loves us as much as he does, and we are moved to want to take up our cross and follow him, as we sang in our opening hymn, "Jesus I my cross have taken, All to leave and follow you." Amen.