**Mark 8:31-38** February 25, 2018

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*Mark 8:31[Jesus] 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. 32He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*

*33But 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.”*

*34Then 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. 35For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? 37Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? 38If 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.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

You’ve seen it in a movie, many movies: “Drinks are on the house!” and everybody gives a cheer. (“What’s pastor been watching?”) Let’s try something a little more family friendly, “Ice cream for everyone!” Just thinking about free Baskin Robbins Raspberry Cheesecake ice cream brings a smile to my face. “Tax breaks for all!” Say that and a politician’s approval ratings rise ten points. You love free stuff. I love free stuff. And we like people who give us free stuff. And truth be told—except for the stingiest, Grinch-iest hearts—we all would love to have the financial wherewithal to hand out nice expensive free stuff—responsibly, of course.

That’s what we want our Christian faith to be, don’t we? Don’t we want people to know the no-cost joy of forgiveness in Jesus? After all we call it the Gospel, and “Gospel” literally means “Good News.” Don’t you love being the first one to share good news! The Bible says, *“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”* I’m not sure why feet, but there you have it.

“Drinks on the house; free ice cream; tax cuts for all!” Let’s try one more:

**Crosses for Everybody!!!  
I. A Cross for Our Leader, Christ**

That doesn’t sound so nice. If it is one of these pretty things, ok, maybe. Or a set of silver plated earrings, sure. But a real cross? You and I have never seen a real cross, but we know what crosses were used for and have an idea what they might have looked like—nail holes, blood stains.

“Crosses for everyone” isn’t what we need, is it? We have so much violence and hatred in our world. Everyone seems to agree that, at least in the last 50 years, our nation has never been so divided as now, and the paths seem to be diverging. Abuse, families falling apart, bad stuff all over. Oh, there are some positive things, but how many? And now “Crosses for everybody,” tools of execution? At least “drinks on the house” help some forget their sorrows for a few hours. At least “Free Ice Cream” brings smiles to faces for an afternoon. At least “tax cuts for all” would fatten people’s pocketbooks. But “Crosses for everyone?” Does anyone want that?

The disciples of Jesus certainly didn’t want crosses for everyone. Not even one cross. Peter had just acclaimed Jesus as *“The Son of the Living God!”* That was just minutes, maybe seconds before our reading. The disciples could start to see the silver lining around the cloud of the humility their teacher wore. Sure he was humble, he walked didn’t ride, he served wasn’t served, but he was the Son of the Living God!

No sooner do they get that glimmer of something great in Jesus than Jesus does this: ***“Then [Jesus] 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. He spoke plainly about this.”*** There are people like that. As soon as they see you starting to enjoy yourself, they can’t help but point out a fault; you talk about the beautiful sunshiny spring day, and they come back with, “Well, tomorrow it is supposed to rain.” Why is Jesus’ raining on the disciples’ parade?

Maybe because the parade is celebrating something Jesus doesn’t want then to celebrate. They had begun to understand that he is the Son of God but they didn’t understand what he came to do. “Who Jesus is” is Christianity 101. “What he came to do” is Christianity 102. And there are some not so pleasant facts in that second class.

Jesus starts to teach them about the cross. Now, if you look carefully, Jesus didn’t yet tell them about the cross specifically. But the essence of the cross is there: ***“[Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer… and be rejected… and be killed.”***

To the disciples it sounded like the Son of the Living God had just jumped a rail. Like us, they were living through and witnessing violence and misfortune day after day. They reasoned: “If Jesus is the Messiah who is supposed to usher in a new day of God’s blessing, what good is it for him to die?

Jesus *seemed* to be saying that his cause, the cause the disciples had thrown in with, was a losing cause.

What do you do about the deadends of life you have gone down? When some scam artist duped you into parting with a healthy portion of your hard-earned money. What about that time you got on the wrong side of the law? We don’t talk about the embarrassments and defeats of life. They shame us. The disciples understood Jesus to be saying that the disciples had thrown in with a losing cause, and it caused panic.

Peter and Andrew, and James and John had been living a happy life down by the lakeside. When Jesus came along they left their going concern of a fishing business for him. Matthew left his tax business. Who knows what the others had left. They had left it all, and now Jesus starts talking of what sounded like failure! They had invested too much to let Jesus fail.

So Peter did the unbelievable. He had just called Jesus *“The Son of the Living God.”* Now he takes Jesus aside like a coach taking aside a twelve-year-old quarterback in a youth football league and begins to have a serious talk with him. ***“He began to rebuke [Jesus]”!***

“No, Jesus, we don’t need a cross. We don’t need death. We don’t need rejection! We need success and glory and fireworks and a wave of popular support. Stop talking like this! Talk like this and the people will jump ship like rats. We don’t need a cross!”

Jesus turns around, faces all the disciples and says to Peter for all to hear, ***“Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the thinsg of God, but the things of men.”*** The cross is God’s plan. The problem Jesus came to address was not foreign oppression or political tyrrany or poverty. The problem was sin.

Like disciples who didn’t want Jesus to talk about a cross, people get so confused about why Jesus entered this world. How often have you heard people who say, “I have been trying to please God, but nothing seems to be working out. Serving God just doesn’t pay.” These people have gotten confused about why Jesus came. Like Peter, they would take Jesus aside and tell him that we need the things of this world, not a cross. The message of Jesus is repulsive to the world because the world doesn’t want what Jesus offers. The cross is a payment for our sins.

The Twelve would come to understand that in the coming years. With the benefit of hindsight, we have a much easier time understanding why Jesus “had to” suffer and die. We now understand the truth that the disciples were wrestling with: our sins put Jesus on the cross. We understand that if Jesus had not gone to the cross, all the health and wealth of this world would do us no good, because we would all stand before God as guilty sinners, with a condemning moral guilt and no plea deal possible.

By the gift of faith in Jesus, a gift not of our own choosing, but of the Holy Spirit’s giving, Jesus’ cross is a blessing to us. As ugly as a cross is, and as terrible a thing as happened there, it is a blessing to us. That is why I wear this, as a reminder. That is why we make beautiful crosses, because Jesus turned the ugliness of his cross into the greatest blessing that did or will ever happen in this created order.

**II. Crosses for the Followers of Christ**

After Jesus explained about his cross to the Twelve, he turned to the crowd. Thousands? Hundreds? Dozens? We don’t know, but he turned to all who followed his and he said, ***‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”*** Crosses for everyone! Not just for the Twelve or for pastors or for really serious Christians; everyone: ***“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*** The original Greek is more forceful, “He *must* deny himself and he *must* take up his cross and he *must* follow me.”

This is a paradox of the Christian faith. When Jesus said, *“It is finished!”* on the cross, the punishment of sin was completely paid. Nothing remained. We can add nothing to Jesus’ payment at the cross. The moment we try to add something, we are in danger of losing it all. The work of salvation was complete at Jesus’ cross.

Yet, Christ has said that anyone who believes in him will deny himself, take up a cross, and follow him. Jesus does not suggest it. He does not say that we should. He says we “must.” Remember: Crosses for everyone!

You *“must take up your cross.”* I have said it before, but it bears repeating: When Jesus talks about *“taking up our cross”* he isn’t talking about all the little and big troubles that happen in life. *“Taking up our cross”* is talking about the things that happen to us specifically because we are Christians, and things that we choose to suffer for Jesus.

Perhaps you have seen the news this past week. In the eternal quest for scapegoats to the Florida shooting, there is a security guard who has been subjected to nation-wide humiliation for his actions. I am not going to judge him, but we are all quite sure that we would never have done that, right? Well, be careful. I have heard enough people assure me that you don’t know how you will act in combat until the bullets start whizzing by your head.

We all fancy ourselves good cross taker-uppers. People who stand up for Jesus, Christian soldiers marching onward. But I doubt that there is a one of us who has never been a coward for Jesus. Maybe one or two of you have been blessed with consistent boldness, but not most of us. At some point we shirked the cross. Maybe it was publicly like Peter who disowned Jesus when he got backed into a corner. Maybe we were cowards in a bar or lunch room when we knew that holding to the moral code that Jesus desires would have made us *not* one of the group. Maybe we shirked the cross through simple silence when we knew we should have spoken. We have thrown the cross into the bushes when we heard people coming, hoping no one will recognize us as cross bearers for Jesus. This is sin, and it carries Jesus’ curse, yes, Jesus’ curse: ***“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him whe he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”***

The Coward of Broward? How about the Coward of Kentucky? But there is one difference. Public opinion, I imagine, will continue to be merciless toward that security officer. I am not going to debate whether that is right or not. But God’s opinion toward us, even after our moments of yellow cowardice, is that all who confess their sins, their weakness, throwing themselves on the mercy of the divine court, they will be forgiven. God is still merciful.

Jesus has called us to bear crosses. Not crosses of punishment, but crosses which honor him. May we always hope in his cross, even after humiliating cowardice. May the cross which marked each of us in our baptism, may that cross, though heavy splintery and uncomfortable at times, may it be our glory. As Jesus said, ***“Whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”*** And that’s just what happened to Jesus isn’t it? He went to the cross, and after three days, he rose again. Amen.