

Second Sunday in Lent; February 25, 2024

+ Mark 8:31-38 +

“Embrace the Cross”

Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things; be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the experts in the law; be killed; and after three days rise again. He was speaking plainly to them. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But after turning around and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have your mind set on the things of God, but the things of men.”

He called the crowd and his disciples together and said to them, “If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. After all, 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? In fact, whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of the Father with the holy angels.”

Ken is driving home from the hospital. He will have to tell his wife and his children the news that he can hardly believe himself. Still young, otherwise healthy, Ken’s days are numbered by a rare disease. All his life Ken’s Sunday School teachers and pastors have taught him that God is love; God guards his people; God will watch over their coming and going both now and forevermore. He read all that in his Bible, too. But what happened today, the news he will have to tell his family, is making that very hard to believe. Ken has a choice to make.

Damien is sitting around the campfire with a group of friends when out comes the booze. He should have known this was going to happen and he should have just stayed home. But he’s here now, and it’s too late. He knows what happens to high school seniors like him who will not drink with their friends. He knows what will be said about the guy who’s too soft to have one little harmless drink with his buddies. He will never hear the end of it, from now until graduation. He also knows that, harmless as it seems, it is wrong to stay and drink with his friends. Damien has a choice to make.

Maggie’s boss has asked her one last time to go over the books of the little company she works for. It’s year-end audit time, and the business has been on thin ice for years; the end could be near if she brings back bad news. There is a way for her to bring back better news, if she only gets a little creative. And she knows that better news will make her boss happy and could even save the jobs of her friends for a little while longer, at least. Only thing is, this creativity not exactly legal. And it’s definitely not honest. Maggie has a choice to make.

Jesus Christ is walking with his disciples when he tells them the time is near. It is almost time for him to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. It is time for the cross. One of his disciples, Peter, says this cannot happen to the Son of God. The Son of God will not suffer. He will not go to the cross. Jesus has a choice to make. He can choose cross or no cross.

Ken's choice is really the same choice. As he heads home from the hospital with such bad news, he can choose cross or no cross. If Ken continues to cling to the truth that God is good, that God is love, that God does care about him, then Ken is in for a cross. He will have to spend his remaining time on earth living with spiritual conflict and confusion. He will have to spend the rest of his days wondering how a good, caring, loving God, could allow something so difficult into his life. He can choose that cross. But Ken can choose no cross. You see, he can choose to relieve all of this spiritual conflict and confusion by simply releasing the notion that God loves him and cares about him. Then he won't have to deal with spiritual turmoil anymore. After all, if God doesn't care, if God doesn't love him, then all this can make sense. No more confusion, no more doubts, no more spiritual pain. No cross. Ken has choice: cross or no cross.

Damien, the kid by the campfire, has a choice. When the Southern Comfort comes out, it's not so much a choice between alcohol and none. He is also choosing cross or no cross. If he gets up and leaves, he will be made of and called a Nancy and gossiped about. He will suffer. He can choose that cross of ridicule for doing what is right. Or he can choose no cross. He can avoid the suffering by staying and drinking and being like everyone else.

As Maggie leans over the company books, she has a choice. She can choose cross or no cross. She can choose to be honest and tell her boss it's all over and watch her friends clock out for the last time. She can choose that cross. Or she can choose no cross. If she does a little baking with the books, she can make her boss happy, save the business for one more year, and keep some friends on the payroll a little while longer.

It may seem a little trivial to compare the crosses of Damien by the campfire and Maggie the accountant to the cross of Jesus Christ. It may even seem a little petty to compare the cross of terminally ill Ken to Jesus' cross. And yes, it's true that no cross in the Christian's life can ever compare to Jesus' cross. But still, we do face crosses.

Just a few weeks ago, in the wonderful devotion book, *Day by Day We Magnify Thee*, I read something I don't really agree with. That happens often when I read, but not when I read an excerpt of a Luther sermon, which this was. In this sermon, written exactly 500 years ago, Luther says that a cross, properly speaking, is only something suffered because of your faith. Therefore, he wrote, illness and financial loss are not crosses, because they happen also to unbelievers. Only persecution and hatred for the name of Christ can be properly called a cross. I agree that persecution and hate for the name of Christ are crosses, but also believe that crosses can come in more diverse forms. Illness is not always a cross, but can become a cross if it forces a spiritual crisis, or raises doubts about God's love. Being made fun of for doing what's right isn't always a cross, but it becomes one if you're doing what's right out of love for Christ.

The crosses of the Christian's life are there any time we must suffer for believing what is true, or doing what is right. No, the crosses of Ken and Jacob and Damien Maggie do not compare to Jesus' cross when it comes to size. But their crosses are like Jesus' in this way: they will cause suffering – if they are not avoided.

When Jesus' disciple Peter tells him not to go to the cross, Jesus has a choice to make. He chooses the cross. He chooses the cross unmistakably: he *must* suffer and die. He chooses the cross emphatically,

rebuking in the strongest possible way the man who suggests he avoid the cross. He chooses the cross without hesitation because he knows what the cross means. The cross means forgiveness for the human beings he loves. And the cross means glory in the end. At the end of the cross, Jesus knows, there is a glorious resurrection waiting for him. After that, there is a glorious ascension. After that, an eternity of glory in heaven where he will be joined by all his saints – all the people who trust in his saving work. So Jesus chooses the cross willingly. Because in the short term, the cross means suffering. But in the end, the cross would bring glory that will last forever, both for him and for his people.

This is God's system. This is how God works: he uses crosses to bring glory. He used Jesus' cross to bring glory for him and for us. He uses the crosses in our lives to bring glory, too. Because when Christians have to suffer for believing and saying and doing what God wants them to believe and say and do, they grow closer to God. They learn to lean on him and his promises. They look to him for strength. Their faith grows stronger, and they find eternal glory in the end. Our crosses bring us glory. They turn us back to God and his promises, which strengthens our faith and leads us to eternal glory.

God uses crosses to achieve glory. That's how he used Jesus' cross, and that's how he uses our crosses, too. So the Godly view of crosses is to take them up willingly, to accept them with solemn joy and even thanksgiving. Because we know how God uses them: for glory in the end.

But the right way to view crosses is often not the way God's people do view crosses. Take St. Peter, for example. He wanted Jesus to avoid the cross, because Peter was looking for glory on the world's terms. He wanted Jesus to find glory in political power, or worldly fame. But that's the world's kind of glory, not God's. That's why Jesus told Peter, **"You have in mind the things of men."** The world looks for glory in wealth and fame and power. Not God. God gives glory in heaven through crosses.

Peter forgot that. And how easily we forget it! How easily we think of suffering for right belief and right action as something to be avoided. How easily we see those crosses as something toxic. And how dangerous that is, to want to avoid crosses. Jesus means exactly what he says: **"If anyone would follow me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."** We must take up our crosses, Jesus says. Not optional. When the time comes to suffer for what we believe or for doing what is right, we must do it. And if we want to avoid it, then we cannot rightly call ourselves followers of Christ.

Nothing in this world is better than the glory of heaven, or even close. Not even life itself: **"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it."** We should not limit "losing life" to martyrdom. It includes the willingness to lose a life of ease, of wealth, of worldly glory for the glory of Jesus' saving gospel. It is putting the glory of heaven so high above the glory of the world that not even the whole world on a platter could pull you from your Savior. **"After all, 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?"** When we say nothing in this world is better than the saving cross of Jesus, we include the world's praise and approval, too. Jesus died for us. It's his approval that matters: **"In fact, whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."** This is still all about embracing crosses. If I must choose between world wealth and heaven wealth in Jesus' cross,

I embrace the cross of Jesus and poverty. If I must choose between world life and heaven life in Jesus' cross, I embrace the cross Jesus and of death. If I must choose between world praise and approval and divine approval in Jesus' cross, I choose the cross of Jesus and of ridicule and mockery.

So, let's get back to Ken, driving home with his news of terminal illness. He is going to suffer if he continues to trust that God is good and loving. He is going to suffer conflict and distress in his soul. He can relieve that tension if he just lets go of his faith. Ken must embrace the cross and live with the tension of a loving God allowing him get sick, a gracious God who sometimes leaves women widows and children fatherless when he calls a man to heaven. Ken must embrace that cross.

Now let's get back to Damien at the campfire. If he is to follow Christ, he must take up the cross of ridicule for doing what is right. Or Maggie the bookkeeper. She must take up the cross of suffering for being honest. If they are to follow Christ, they must take up their crosses.

And so must we. If Ken, Damien, and Maggie choose the cross, they will find glory in the end, just like Jesus did. They will go back to God's promises, grow in faith, and find eternal life. And so will we, when we embrace our crosses, take them up, and follow Christ.

We Christians can – and will – embrace the cross because God has made new creations. We will see glory in suffering, take up our crosses and follow Christ because when God brought us to faith in Christ he made us new beings. He gave us new eyes, eyes that do not see things the way most people do. He gave us eyes to see crosses as a blessing that increase our faith and lead to eternal life. You are a new creation. In the words of St. Paul, the old has gone, the new has come. You are in Christ, and you see crosses the same way your Savior did. Not as something to avoid, but something to embrace. Because at the end of the cross, God has glory for you.

The next time you face a cross, embrace it as Jesus' embraced his cross. Believe what's right, even when it would be easier to let your belief go. Do what's right, even when it hurts. Embrace the cross because you are God's new creation. You are his new creation that sees glory in crosses. As his new creation, pick up your cross, embrace it, and follow Jesus to glory. Amen.