

“Like A Tree!”

In previous weeks, our lessons from the Gospel of Mark have depicted Jesus as a teacher and preacher. Once more, today’s lesson opens with Jesus teaching his disciples, as well as us, a very difficult, very tough lesson. When Jesus tells his disciples that he must “suffer many things ... be rejected ... and be killed,” Peter rebukes him. It is important to remember that Peter’s role in the Bible is that of a “voice.” In other words, when Peter speaks, he speaks for all the disciples ... in fact, he speaks for us. So when Peter rebukes Jesus for teaching about a “suffering Messiah,” his resistance to the way of the cross is in fact an expression of our very own resistance to Jesus’ way. In this lesson, Peter symbolizes all believers who resist the suffering and the cross.

After Peter rebukes Jesus, Jesus in turn admonishes Peter in even stronger terms by referring to him as “Satan.” Afterwards, Jesus teaches that not only is the cross in Peter’s future, but for all his disciples, as well ... for cross bearing and discipleship go together. Letting go ... loosing ... suffering --- are all linked to faithful discipleship in today’s gospel lesson. During the Season of Lent, Jesus directs our attention toward the cross. All the cultural, blessed human characteristics that make up our lives are assaulted in this text: the pursuit of pleasure, the avoidance of pain and sacrifice, the gaining rather than losing. All are laid aside by Jesus.

Yet, most troubling, all these drives by which our strings are pulled are laid aside for us. Surely this accounts for Peter’s rebuke. Not only is Jesus predicting a hard way ahead for himself, but for us as well. Peter believes that this is no way for a Messiah to behave. More troubling for us, we hope this is no way for disciples to behave. Peter’s resistance is our resistance. And so, today’s gospel lesson is an invitation for each of us to reflect upon the gain and the loss in our own attempts to be faithful disciples: *Thou the Cross didst bear: What bear I? Thou the thorn didst wear: What wear I? Thou to death didst dare: What dare I? Thou for me dost care: What care I?*

I believe what was troubling Peter, and what troubles us about the Christian faith is the important difference between believing and following. Peter and many others believed Jesus was the Messiah. They just weren’t clear about what type of Messiah. They had the image of a conquering Messiah --- a mighty Warrior! When Jesus makes clear his definition of Messiah, he brings forth the Prophet Isaiah’s definition of a “Suffering Messiah,” which in turn, translates: “if one follows a Suffering Messiah, they too will also suffer for their belief.” This is what troubles Peter, and this is what troubles us: that suffering and discipleship go together ... that suffering and the gospel go together ... even today ... especially today. For what is more important ... that we believe ... or that we follow?

Renowned biblical scholar Ernst Kasemann reminds us that it is not so important to believe in Jesus as to follow Jesus. Kasemann writes: ... *one single beam of (Jesus’) light in our existence seems to me more important than the full sun of any orthodoxy. For...what is decisive for all time is not how much we have believed, but that we have believed and followed him however little we have understood about him.*” If we wait until we fully understand who Jesus is, and fully grasp his teachings before we commit to follow, we may never follow; we may never commit; we waste precious time. Faith, for the most part, is a leap into discipleship, trusting that Jesus is the Messiah and that God will direct and lead us; be with us wherever we go --- never fully understanding why, but only glad to serve. George Orwell, remembering his English public school said: “You were bidden to be at once a Christian and a social success, which is impossible.”

This part of Mark’s gospel is so near the heart and center of the Christian faith, that if we were only to face each day with two verses locked in our hearts and dominating our life, it would be Mark 8:34, 35: “If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and let him take up his cross, and let him follow me.”

The condition of discipleship is denial or leaving behind or forgetting or renouncing the self. To deny is to disown or disregard, and the self is this complex of personal desires, ambitions, and interest that are at cross purposes with discipleship. As one author writes: "A person who denies him or her self, gives up all reliance on whatever they are by nature, and depend for salvation on God alone!"

Three lessons can be gleaned from these two verses. First, there is the startling honesty of Jesus. We can never say that we are induced to follow Jesus by false pretenses. Jesus never tried to bribe people by the offer of an easy way. Jesus did not offer people peace; he offered them glory. To tell a person they must be ready to take up a cross was to tell them they must be ready to be regarded as a criminal and to die. The honesty of great leaders has always been one of their characteristics. Winston Churchill offered people only "blood, toil, tears and sweat." The great Italian patriot Garibaldi appealed for recruits in these terms: "I offer neither pay, nor quarters, nor provisions; I offer hunger, thirst, forced marches, battle and death. Let him who loves his country in his heart, and not with his lips only, follow me." This is the meaning behind Kaseman's thought that it is less important to believe in Jesus than to follow him! Jesus came not to make life easy but to make people great.

The second lesson is the fact that Jesus never called on people to do anything that he was not prepared to do himself. This, again, is another characteristic of a leader whom people will follow. Jesus never preached "do as I say and not what I do." Jesus was clear: "Do as I do!" There was a famous Roman general named Fabius who, while discussing with his staff how to take a difficult position, was interrupted by someone suggesting a different course of action. This counselor said, "It will only cost the lives of a few men." Fabius looked at him and said: "Are you willing to be one of the few?" Jesus was not the kind of leader who sat remote and played with the lives of disciples like expendable pawns. What Jesus demanded, he, too, was ready to face. Jesus has a right to call on us to take up a cross, for he himself first bore one.

The third lesson is Jesus' teaching of denying oneself. We will understand the meaning of this demand if we take it very simply and literally. If a person will follow Jesus Christ, they must say yes to Christ and no to self. We must say no to every course of action based on self-seeking and self-will. We must say no to those instincts, compulsions and desires which prompt us to do the things which bring harm and destruction to self and others. We must unhesitatingly say yes to the voice and the command of Jesus Christ. In every situation, before we act, we must ask, "What would Jesus do?" We must be able to say with the Apostle Paul that it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us. Because we believe, we live no longer to follow our own will, but to follow the will of Christ, and in that service we find our perfect freedom.

By adhering to Jesus' commands to take up our cross, to believe and follow, we find our life by losing our life. Jesus follows his teaching of cross bearing with this teaching: "Whoever seeks to save his life shall lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel shall save it." There are certain things that are lost by being kept and saved by being used. Any talent that one possesses is like that. If we use it, it will develop into something still greater. If we refuse to use it, we will in the end lose it. Life is just like that! God gave us life to spend and not to keep.

If we live carefully, always thinking first of our own profit, ease, comfort, security ... if our sole aim is to make life as trouble-free as possible ... if we will make no effort except for ourselves, we are losing life all the time. But if we spend life for others ... if we forget time and wealth and comfort in our desire to do something for Jesus and for those whom Jesus died, we are winning life all the time. The very essence of life is risking life and spending life, not in saving it and hoarding it. True, it is the way of weariness, of exhaustion, of giving to the uttermost --- but it is better any day to burn out than to rust out.

For what profit is it for a person to gain the whole world and to forfeit their life? In fact what Jesus asks us is, "Where do you put your values in life?" It is possible for us to put our values on the wrong things

and to discover it too late. People are known to sacrifice honor for profit, such as Mr. Ames, the CIA mole, who sold out his country, its security for his own wealth. The eternal question that we will have to answer is, "How does our life's balance sheet look to God?" God is the Auditor who in the end we must face. We may sacrifice principle for popularity or selfish motives, but in the end the question we will have to face is not, "What did other people think of me" but "What does God think of me?" It is not the verdict of public opinion but the verdict of God that settles destiny.

There are also the times when we may be tempted to sacrifice the lasting things for the cheap things. It is easier to have cheap success by cutting corners, cheating, doing enough just to get by, taking the easy path, never risking, always procrastinating, thinking and acting like "the grass is greener on the other side." Life has a way of revealing the true values and condemning the false as the years pass on. A cheap thing never lasts. The bottom line is that there is a real human temptation to sacrifice our eternity for the moment. We would be saved from all kinds of mistakes if we always look at things in the light of eternity. Many a thing is pleasant for the moment, but ruinous in the long run. The test of eternity is to see things as God sees them. If we see things as God sees them, we will never spend our life on the things that lose our soul.

There is no other way out of this life than the way of the Cross, the Cross Jesus carried, suffered upon and died. The Cross, made from a tree, symbolizes for us the common law of life which one author poetic puts:

The tree that never had to fight
For sun and sky and air and light,
That stood out in the open plain,
And always got its share of rain,
Never became a forest king,
But lived and died a scrubby thing.
The man who never had to win his share
Of sun and sky and light and air,
Never became a manly man,
But lived and died as he began.
Good timber does not grow in ease.
The stronger the wind, the tougher trees;
The farther the sky, the greater length;
The more the storm, the more the strength;
By sun and cold, by rain and snows,
In tree or man good timber grows.
Where thickest stands the forest growth
We find the patriarchs of both,
And they hold converse with the stars
Whose broken branches show the scars
Of many winds and much of strife ---
This is the common law of life.

This cross is like that poetic tree. This cross symbolizes all the ones I know each of you have carried during your lifetime ... are carrying now. This cross is a constant reminder that you carry your own not in vain. You conquered suffering in the past ... you will overcome suffering in the present. Your faith will keep you ...so keep your faith. And like the strongest of trees, you stand not alone. We weather life together because together we are the Body of Christ --- the One Body this cross could not defeat. Amen!