

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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March 4, 2018
3rd Sunday in Lent
Mark 8:31-38

Called to Sacrificial Love

The cross is for us a beautiful symbol that is so central to our Christian faith. It stands for the amazing love of God given to the world in the gift of God's son, Jesus. When we see the cross it evokes in us an awareness of that which is so central to our faith.

We have crosses in our sanctuaries, as we do here. They're on our communion tables; on our Bibles and hymnals. Many wear a cross as a necklace or lapel pin. And they're found in all the visual arts. As Christians, we love the cross, and rightly so, since it is the perfect symbol of our faith.

For our expression of Christianity in the Protestant tradition, most often the cross is displayed as an empty cross. It is empty because Jesus who was crucified and died on the cross was three days later resurrected, leaving behind the empty cross as an emblem of Jesus' triumph over death. Again, in this form the cross is a beautiful and meaningful symbol.

But even in the churches such as the Roman Catholic church, where the cross is more often displayed as a crucifix on which Jesus is shown to be hanging, it is still a symbol that is filled with a depth of meaning and purpose. While a crucifix, depicting the pain and anguish of Jesus dying, places an emphasis on Jesus' death on our behalf, it is still a richly meaningful symbol because of our knowledge that Jesus' death on the cross was not the end of the story.

So for all Christians, seeing the cross or the crucifix is a positive encounter with the God who loves us and who we in turn love.

In Jesus' day there was absolutely nothing positive about the cross. In fact, the sight of a cross or even the mere mention of a cross was enough to strike fear and terror in people. For the cross was an instrument of a brutal, cruel and gruesome death by crucifixion that was inflicted by the Romans on those who were seen as enemies or threats to the state. The sight of crosses and the public nature of crucifixions were intended to keep the masses under control and loyal to the Roman government. This was a very effective strategy.

Those who were sentenced to die by crucifixion were often made to take up the cross on which they would be hung to die and carry it to the place where they would be crucified. The sight of such a criminal carrying his cross was a terrifying sight, second only to witnessing his actual death by crucifixion on the cross that would follow.

Perhaps you have seen photos of an electric chair that has been used for executions in our day. They show the restraints that are used to secure the convicted, along with the electrodes that go off to a control panel, as well as the hood that goes over the head of the one to be killed. While they are not on public display, and while death by electrocution is done in the middle of the night, far from public view, I find that seeing such photos and hearing accounts of such executions to be deeply troubling and disturbing. While they do not strike fear of the government in me, they do nevertheless remind me of the barbaric nature of one part of our criminal justice system. To a certain degree, the electric chair, and the threat of capital punishment in our time are reminders to the populace of the ultimate power of the state.

I share these negative thoughts and feelings and emotions as a way of helping us to understand how those listening to Jesus would have reacted one day when he said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mk. 8:34)

We may have heard this declaration by Jesus so many times that its full impact is lost. Or even if we're not familiar with it, its impact is still reduced if all we know about the cross is that it's associated with Christianity.

Furthermore, in our day, we have reduced the idea of bearing a cross to associate it with the challenges and struggles that we face from time to time. We sometimes will hear it said that we all have our personal crosses to bear. While there are surely those who have had to bear a cross on par with the cross that Jesus bore, most of these personal crosses to bear pale in comparison.

So when Jesus made this declaration about those would be followers taking up their cross and following him, the reaction would have been stunned silence. It would have left those who heard Jesus say it pondering the magnitude of what Jesus was asking.

This account in the 8th chapter of Mark has been described as a hinge point in the story of Jesus as told by Mark. It is approximately at the half-way point in this gospel. Up until now, the work and message of Jesus has been all about sharing God's love through teaching, preaching, healing and performing miracles. Up until this point, it would have felt pretty good to be among the group of people who had been following him in his travels. Jesus was a winsome teacher who had attracted followers who wanted to know more about him and hear more of what he had to say.

But with this talk of his having to undergo great suffering and rejection and even being killed, the storyline has changed. The good and positive feelings and associations with this company of followers changed to become more uncertain and unsettling and challenging.

From here on out, Jesus has his sights set on Jerusalem where he will encounter both religious and civil authorities—both having more than a bone to pick with him. The story changes as Jesus begins the journey that he knows will end with his death on a cross. The story changes as Jesus begins to make it clear that following him is much more than being his eager listeners and adoring fans cheering him on.

In fact, before Jesus made this declaration about taking up the cross, he tells his disciples that he will undergo great suffering and rejection and then be killed before rising again after three days. So upsetting was this to the disciples, that the apostle Peter tried to rebuke Jesus for saying these things. Clearly Peter and the others did not yet understand the turning point nature of this revelation by Jesus.

Jesus will hear nothing of Peter's rebuke when he replies, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus invokes the name of Satan who in this case is the great deceiver who's purpose is to trick us into believing that we have the final say on our ultimate destiny. It's then that Jesus calls on his listeners who wish to follow him to take up their crosses and line up behind him.

What are we to make of this demand in our lives today? Jesus' talk of suffering, rejection and bearing a cross is a powerful corrective to the idea that the purpose of Christianity revolves around me and my needs—that it's all about what benefits are given to those who follow in the way of Jesus.

There is a broad misconception that prevails to this day that affiliation with the Christian church is a transactional relationship where I as a member do my part—such as pledging financial support, teaching in Sunday school, doing my fair share of the work and the sort—in order to receive or obtain benefits such as a claim on the church's care, status as a member of the "in church," or tips for better living. Sometimes you will hear someone who holds this view say that they haven't yet found the perfect church because they're just not getting anything from the churches they have visited.

Membership in the church is membership in the body of Christ. It is not a membership like those membership organizations that we may be part of that offer discounts on rental cars, or lower cost air fares, or bonus points that can be redeemed for the things and stuff we want.

In this hinge point in Mark's gospel, Jesus is not talking about getting anything from following him. In fact, those who are looking to get, just don't get it when it comes to answering Jesus' call to take up their crosses and follow him. He says it as plainly as he can when he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them *deny themselves*. . . ." There is no getting when denying oneself.

Jesus is talking about giving oneself, just like he is preparing to give himself in sacrificial love.

And as Jesus goes the way before us, he calls us to follow in his way.

Our orientation begins to change when we start to look for and see what we can do, rather than what we can get. Jesus was all about doing and giving and we're called to that sacrificial love as well.

We need not look too hard in the world around us to find situations and realities calling out for attention and intervention.

At the community level there are numerous opportunities to engage in meaningful efforts to not only relieve the suffering of those who are hungry, who are homeless, who are sick and in prison, but to bring about a positive change in the circumstances around those needs. Many of you are already participating in the work of agencies and organizations that are here to do just that.

Others are involved in working through our participatory government where ordinary citizens can have an impact on social and governmental policies that can alleviate the problems of hunger, homelessness, public health and criminal justice, to name just a few.

Still others can stand, hand in hand, with those who are directly engaged in such mission activities.

Our call to sacrificial love changes the way in which we look at the challenges around us and begin to see them as opportunities to share God's love.

In just a few moments we're going to be commissioning our Presby Cats college group who are heading to Florida for spring break where they will be working on the front lines of social challenges in that metro area.

When we commission—*co-mission*, we are entering into that mission alongside them. We invite you to do just that as we send them in sacrificial love.

Each year in this season of Lent, it behooves us to step back and take a look at the cross and all the other aspects of Jesus' story leading up to Easter. And while it is good for us to be reminded of how the cross was not always a thing of beauty, it is also important for us to recognize, and even celebrate in the midst of Lent, the overpowering significance of how the work of Jesus took what was feared and despised—that is the cross—and transformed it into that which points to the amazing sacrificial love of Jesus.