

2nd Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2024
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Mark 8:31-38

Rethinking Suffering Under the Cross

Mark 8:31-38 (EHV)

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. ³²He was speaking plainly to them. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.”

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶After all, what good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸In 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.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

In just over a month, we will gather for a very special worship service on a Friday. Christians have called that day, “Good Friday” for many centuries. We understand why it is a good day even though the details of that day are not pleasant. The Scriptures give us the details of the physical, emotional, and spiritual pain Christ endured. This kind of suffering and death is difficult to contemplate but we know and rejoice in the good Christ accomplished on Good Friday. For through his cross of suffering, he paid for the sins of the world. We can say that the cross is good in this sense, for through it we are forgiven of every sin.

We have the benefit of living many years after Christ’s death and resurrection. Peter was having trouble seeing how the suffering and death of Jesus would be anything except bad.

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Peter recently confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Now he rebukes the Christ, the Son of God. That is either very bold or very foolish. If Jesus is truly the Son of God, then he needs no rebuke. But we can understand why Peter would be confused. Jesus was telling them something that made no sense. The Son of God was going to be killed. God is immortal. God cannot be killed by mortal man. This doesn’t make sense. In addition, Jesus tells them that these things must happen. It is necessary for Jesus to be rejected, killed and rise on the third day. Think about that.

How can any course of action be necessary for God? He has walked on the water, healed the sick and raised the dead. Nothing is impossible for Jesus. Yet, this course of action is necessary. There is no other option, no other way. Jesus spoke the world into existence at the beginning of time. How can he be bound to one course of action? No one can bind the will of God, except God himself. Jesus must be rejected, killed and rise on the third day because he has chosen this course of action to save the world from sin and death. Christ has bound himself to suffering and death on the cross because he has in mind the things of God.

You are one of the things of God. Our Triune God's great desire is to save all who have sinned. The Father chose to give his Son for your salvation. The Son chose to humble himself to death on a cross for your salvation. The Spirit chose to bring you to faith and keep you in faith through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. Thanks be to God for choosing to do what must be done to save us.

Now Jesus tells us what our lives will be like as his followers.

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We understand why Jesus' cross is good. But our natural reaction to a cross is to avoid it at all costs. Especially for those who heard these words with their own ears, the cross would have been a horrible thought. It was the instrument of extreme torture used by the Romans on the worst criminals and rebels. To pick up a literal cross is a revolting thought. Tradition tells us that Peter was one of the disciples who would literally have to suffer and die by the cross. But Jesus is not telling us that every Christian will carry a literal cross. He asks us all to do something equally revolting and difficult.

Christ asks us to deny ourselves. We are to submit our will to God's will. It would almost be easier to go to the cross than to daily deny ourselves. A husband may be willing to give up his life to protect his wife but not so willing to do the dishes to serve his wife. We tell ourselves that we deny ourselves the big sins in the world and therefore letting ourselves enjoy a few of the smaller sins won't hurt. I don't embezzle money from the company, so I let myself scroll social media for hours on company time. I don't go to the bar and get drunk every night, so I allow myself to use obscene language to blow off steam instead. I won't take revenge on that person for hurting me but I'm going to nurse a grudge against them for quite some time.

We deny ourselves what we consider the big things but indulge in what we consider the small things and call that good. Jesus' warning is for all of us today. If we want to do whatever we want, we are in danger of losing our eternal lives. If we want to make up our own rules for what is good and what is not, we are in danger of forfeiting our soul.

Jesus chose to do what was necessary to redeem our eternal souls. In every moment, he chose to submit his will to his Father's will in order to save us. Our self denial will not save us. Christ's cross saves us. His choices saved us. Our self denial is a response to his cross, a recognition of all he did to save us.

Self denial is not something a believer is forced to do or something we do as a condition of our salvation. Jesus willingly chose the necessary cross to save sinners. We willingly choose to continue following Christ by picking up our cross and denying ourselves. But note that we are not denying our whole selves. For we are children of God, purchased and won by the precious blood of Christ. As the beloved people of God, we willingly and gladly submit our will to God's. There is no pain in such a life.

However, we are at the same time a saint and a sinner. The old, sinful nature clings to us and this is the self we deny, the old self. It hurts to deny this old self since it is still part of us. But we willingly do what must be done. By daily repentance we do battle with the old self and rejoice in the forgiveness of Christ. We repent of any desires or actions that lead us away from the need for Christ and cling to the Savior who willingly went to the cross for us. We daily say no to the

desires of this world and align our will with Christ's.

Jesus' time of suffering under the cross came to an end with his resurrection on the third day. This was also part of what must happen. Similarly, our time of suffering under the cross of self denial will come to an end. Our Lord will remove the old, sinful self from us before we enter our eternal homes. No longer will there be any conflict on the inside or outside. For then, we will be perfectly aligned with the will of our God as we worship the Lamb on the throne, the One who had to be slain but who is living forever and ever.

Amen.