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Mark 8:27-38

## CHOOSING THE CROSS

With today's technology, everybody is in the marketing business. It isn't just advertising companies, or celebrities, or politicians that try to promote a certain image of themselves in order to generate public interest. Now, through social media, *individuals* market themselves to one another and craft carefully constructed images of themselves that they want others to see. Churches have followed suit. Visit any church's webpage and you will see what they want you to see about themselves: their successful ministries, their smiling members, their terrific staff, their beautiful building. Particularly in these difficult times of declining church attendance, web pages are carefully constructed to help congregations present an image designed to attract members.

I defy you to find this message on any church's webpage; I read from today's scripture from Mark: "Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'"

Can you imagine someone seeing this on a church's web page and thinking, "Yeah, *that's* the church I want to join!?" The cross is a turn-off. Even Christians don't like it. An architect asked to design one of those huge California churches was told, "We do not want any crosses on the church, either outside or inside. We don't want anybody to think failure and weakness." \* In a society oriented around success, the message of sacrifice does not sell too well. You can see these ideas reinforced in the words of our president when he stated that he didn't respect a

decorated Vietnam veteran and United States' Senator who languished and suffered 5 years in a Vietnam prisoner of war camp, because he preferred people who didn't get captured. Our society does not like weakness and for many who gaze upon it, the cross stands as a symbol of weakness and failure.

Peter for sure felt that way. That is why the disciple Peter is horrified when Jesus starts talking about the Son of God undergoing suffering, rejection, and ultimately death. That's not what Peter expects for the Messiah. The Messiah is supposed to come in strength, and might, and power, and receive acclaim and praise and victory. But death on a cross, suffering, rejection--these are unthinkable. And Peter tells Jesus just that. The cross? No, never!

You know, it's enough of a challenge if Jesus had gone to the cross alone. Like Peter, we don't easily take to the crucified Jesus. But sit through enough sermons and go to enough Sunday school classes, we can begin to accept the message that Jesus died for us, that Jesus died for our sins, that Jesus made what is the ultimate sacrifice. It's enough of a challenge if Jesus had gone to the cross alone. But then he takes us with him. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." He takes us with him.

Jesus goes to the cross and takes us with him to the cross not because he celebrates suffering. Suffering is not the goal. Faithfulness to the way of God *is*. And you cannot be faithful to God's way without incurring the cross. When you do what Jesus did or say what Jesus said, the cross becomes inevitable. He was faithful to God's way, and thus came the cross. And because he calls us to be faithful to God's way, because as his followers we are to do what Jesus did and say what Jesus said, he knows the cross lies in store for us as well.

We want to be clear about what Jesus means when he calls his followers to take up our crosses. Too often, such phrases have been quoted to keep abused women living with their

abusive husbands or to justify all kinds of oppression, telling people, "It's your cross to bear."

These kinds of statements are a clear distortion of Jesus' words. When Jesus called his followers to take up their crosses and follow him he was speaking to those who could make a *choice*. Jesus never coerces. If there is no room for someone to say no, then the "yes" has no meaning. Jesus calls but does not coerce. He calls his followers to follow his way in the world. But he is upfront with a warning: he warns us that it will involve the cross. The cross is not optional, the cross is not just born by a few really pious saints, the cross is not something we can avoid if we are lucky. The cross is what will follow if you and I are following Christ.

It is said that during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, when Christians were suffering, dying, being tortured in the struggle for justice in that land, Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to gather his staff together each morning for prayer. And sometimes as he was closing, he would ask his staff, "If being a Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us?" It is an important question to ask ourselves. If being a Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us? Following the way of God means putting ourselves in situations that will not be easy, smooth, or comfortable. Caring for the stranger, loving our enemies, standing up for the vulnerable, forgiving people who have hurt us, these are not easy and will not always be appreciated by our society, friends, neighbors. The great preacher, Fred Craddock, said, "Faith is not a success story; faith is a story that says, 'I take this up as my way of life.'" \*

I take this up as my way of life. That is what Jesus is calling us to do. Take this up as our way of life knowing that the cross comes with it.

The Southern preacher and civil rights advocate, Will Campbell, was the only white person that Martin Luther King, Jr. invited to the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference in 1957. His efforts on behalf of racial justice and equal rights for African Americans, women, and gay and lesbian people were lengthy and celebrated. But Campbell scandalized many of his friends when he offered pastoral care to members of the KKK in prison and when he attended the trial of one of his own parishioners who was a former KKK imperial wizard who had killed a grocery store owner for selling food to African Americans. When a reporter asked Campbell how he, an advocate for racial justice, could attend the trial of this KKK imperial wizard, Campbell exploded, "Because I'm a Christian Goddammit!" In a calmer moment Campbell added, "If you're gonna love one, you've got to love 'em all."

Loving them all--the enemy, the friend, the stranger, the undocumented, the bigot--loving them all is the cross we take up when we follow Christ.

Speaking up for what is right when you know that what you say will be unpopular, is the cross we take up when we follow Christ.

Forgiving those who have hurt us when we'd just as soon walk away and sever ties, is the cross we take up when we follow Christ.

Getting up early after a late night shift at work in order to drive a neighbor to the hospital for surgery, organizing a protest against an injustice, volunteering at a local charity, simplifying your spending and consuming habits to be respectful of the earth and its people, these are the crosses we take up when we follow Christ.

The message of the cross is not going to be a great marketing strategy for gaining members. But nor is it a way exclusively of hardship and suffering. Jesus teaches us about the way of the cross, the way of following God that involves sacrifice, because he knows it is the path that brings abundant life. The way of the cross is a divine vocation that offers meaning and purpose and direction to our lives. What the world sees as losing, we see as gaining. Jesus

offers us that odd paradox: that it is only by losing our life for sake of the gospel that we can hope to save it. Only when we stop grasping and holding on to what we think will keep us safe, bring us meaning, make us happy, only when we let go and give our lives over to God's way, will we discover ourselves saved.

Jesus invites us to make a choice, to choose to walk with him the road that leads to God. And you will know if you are indeed walking with Jesus if there is a cross.

\* Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, Westminster John Knox, 2001