

2<sup>nd</sup> in Lent, March 8, 2009

Second Baptist Church, Lincoln, NE; Robert C. Molby, Interim Pastor

### What does it mean to take up one's Cross?

Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38 (NRSV)

#### *Jesus Predicts His Death*

31) He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32) He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33) But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

34) Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35) For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36) What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? 37) Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? 38) If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

"He **then** began to teach them..." A key word is "then". Why did he "then" begin to teach them? What is Jesus doing now that he did not do before?

Up until this point in Mark's Gospel the question about Jesus is: "Who is he?"

- Mark's prologue introduces Jesus by way of John who came baptizing in the desert region. Then the baptism and temptation of Jesus and a little bit of who is this Jesus. There are healings and miracles, exorcism's; all told to intrigue the reader about who this Jesus is. He can heal people, perform miracles and cast out demons. And the demons recognize him but he tells them to be quiet.
- And then, just prior to our Gospel reading for today Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is. And they answer, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." But then Jesus asks them point blank, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" And Peter answers for the disciples, "You are the Christ." Then Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about him. Now, after half the Gospel of Mark is read and the question, "Who is Jesus?" – Now comes the answer, he is the Christ.

From here on Mark is saying that now you know who Jesus is, this is what it means to be his disciple, to follow him.

- Our Gospel for today begins, "He **then** began to teach them..."

What is he teaching them?

- That the Son of man must suffer many things
- Be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law
- He must be killed and after three days rise again

Will you follow someone who is going to suffer many things, be rejected and then killed but after three days rise again? It's hard to hear "rise again" after hearing the bad news of suffering, rejection and death.

Jesus spoke plainly about this so that there was no misunderstanding. But Peter, however – good old Peter, after his previous confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God, begins to tell Jesus just how it is going to be – he rebukes Jesus. Can you imagine – Peter telling Jesus that he was wrong? "Jesus you must not suffer, don't worry about rejection and forget about being killed. We need you alive, to be our leader,

in this great undertaking of your being the Messiah.” I suspect he ignored the part about rising again but, to be killed, that could not happen; that would end the movement that Jesus had started.

Then Jesus looks at his disciples who have been listening in on this confrontation of Peter with Jesus and he rebukes Peter. He does it loud enough that they all can hear – in front of everybody. He says, to Peter, calling him Satan, “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

There is a crowd standing around and Jesus calls them, along with his disciples. He has something to say to all, including us.

- “If you want to be my followers,” says Jesus, “there are three things you must do.”
  - ✓ You must deny yourself
  - ✓ You must take up your cross, and third
  - ✓ You must follow Jesus

What does it mean to deny yourself, to take up your cross and then follow Jesus? When have I ever denied myself anything to the glory of God? What is the cross I must take up? Can't I follow Jesus without denying myself or taking up a cross? Just what does it mean to take up one's cross?

I've heard people say, “It's a cross I have to bear” and they refer to a handicap or some person which they have to care or someone with whom they have a hard time getting along with. I don't think that is what taking up one's cross means.

I know people with physical handicaps and I never hear them saying that it is a cross they have to bear. I cringe inside whenever I hear a person speak of someone they live with or care for as a cross they have to bear. So what does it mean to bear one's cross?

- First, what is the meaning of the cross? It is an instrument of death. I have not read of anyone ever escaping death by the cross. It is a particularly cruel form of death -- because it was slow and agonizing. The one hanging from the cross dies of suffocation.
- The cross was an instrument of oppression and power. It was a method that those in power used to show that they had power over anyone who would go against them. On the Cross the victim is utterly powerless.
- The cross meant the end -- the end of their ability to determine their own future, the end of their power to control their destiny, the end of whatever they thought they would be able to accomplish on their own.
- To take up our cross means that we face squarely our limitations.
- To take up our cross means that we realize in the face of sin we are powerless.
- To take up our cross means that we come to terms with our inability to control. Finally, we face our powerlessness.

Jesus says to take up your cross and follow him. Where did Jesus go when he took up his cross?

- Jesus faced the limits of human power. He demonstrated that human evil is indeed powerful -- so powerful that it can put a person as good as Jesus to death; so powerful that it can oppress a movement of healing and wholeness like the one Jesus had started.
- On the cross, Jesus' ability to change the world by himself was put to death.
- But we must continue to follow Jesus in order to see that the cross is not the end of the journey. Three days after the cross God raised him up -- and proved that no power is greater than God, not even death. The cross means that, alone, without God, we are powerless.

We must follow Jesus through the cross to the resurrection -- from Good Friday to Easter morning. We must participate in the power of God to bring life out of death. To take up our cross and follow Jesus means that God

can take our sinful selves, our diseased bodies, our impotent will, our addictions and give it the power to accomplish God's will on earth.

We have any number of illustrations: Adoniran Judson who could have been a comfortable clergyman in the United States but he and his wife went to India and Burman to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. I think of Dr. Fountain who could have had a comfortable life as a doctor here in the United States but he went to Zairie instead. I think of Maza Evans, whom I claim as a relative – an aunt of my Uncle Chester Rowland – who served as a missionary teacher in Assam, India for thirty-three years. She went in the days when she traveled by car from Washington, KS to Lincoln, NE where she boarded a train to Chicago and then by train to New York. Then she took a ship from New York. I have her letters and remember reading how she first thought that those people who were seasick were kind of strange. That was when she was in the first few days of her trip. Then it was at least a week before she wrote again and she said that she then understood why those people were sick. Anyway she spent thirty-three years serving as a missionary in India when she could have had a comfortable life in Kansas. These and others took up their cross to follow Jesus where he led them and gave them the power to accomplish God's will on earth.

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

When faced with overwhelming odds -- or just with our own limitations, those who take up their cross and follow Jesus do not lose heart -- because they know that there is

- a power beyond –
- a power beyond the cross –
- a power beyond our sin –
- a power beyond our limitations, our helplessness and our weakness.

It is the power of God to bring life from death, to bring healing from disease, to bring wholeness from our brokenness.

**We take up our cross when we embrace our sinful selves, when we accept our limitations and follow Christ beyond them.**

In this season of Lent may we truly discover what it means to deny ourselves for the glory of God, to truly know what it means to take up our Cross and to follow Jesus beyond the Cross.

Hear again the rest of Jesus' statement in the Gospel according to Mark:

35) For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36) What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? 37) Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? 38) If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."