

Lent 2B

Mark 8:31-38

You might remember Ukrainian-American comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the United States from Ukraine he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk--you just add water & you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice-- you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, 'What a country!'"

Smirnoff is joking but we make these assumptions about Christian Transformation --that people change instantly at salvation. Some traditions call it repentance and renewal. Some call it Sanctification of the believer. Whatever we call it, some traditions expect some quick fix to sin. According to this belief, when someone gives his or her life to Christ, there is an immediate, substantive, in-depth, miraculous change in habits, attitudes, and character. We go to church as if we are going to the grocery store: "Powdered Christian." Just add water and disciples are born not made.

Unfortunately, there is no such powder and disciples of Jesus Christ are not instantly born. We are slowly raised through many trials, suffering, and temptations. A study has found that only 11 percent of churchgoing teenagers have a well-developed faith, rising to only 32 percent for churchgoing adults. Why? Because true life change only begins when we accept Christ. Becoming a disciple of Christ takes more than just time--it is about training, trying, suffering, and even dying.

Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Why? Peter believed the kingdom of God could be obtained instantly by force. Peter had a worldly view of the Kingdom and Jesus was speaking about a heavenly kingdom. For a moment I would like you to listen to this story with new ears and see Jesus through the eyes of Peter and the rest of the disciples. Take away from your mind Jesus as the Son of God. Strip from your memory that he died on the Cross and that he did that for your sins. Forget that Jesus ever said love your enemies or love your neighbor. Peter's idea of what Jesus should do & God's idea were at cross-purposes.

Now you are thinking like Peter. Jesus before his disciples and laid out his military strategy. Look at verse 31. Basically Jesus said, "We are going to march into Jerusalem and I, your leader, will suffer many things. We are not going to get any help from our Jewish brothers the Elders. Even the Chief Priest and the Sadducees will not join us. Our government, the Sanhedrin, is corrupt and can be of no help to us. We are going it alone and I will die in this battle."

On this day Jesus spoke plainly to his disciples about the events soon to transpire and even though it was plain language it was not plain enough. Peter was not able to shake his understanding of Jesus as his General so he took Jesus aside & rebuked him. He said, "Sir, this is not a very good military strategy. You are not going to die. Don't say that. It's not good for morale. We are going to be there with you & we will fight to the end we will throw these godless Romans out of Israel, you will ascend to the throne in place of Herod, and we will be at your right and left hand as the new leaders of Israel."

It is fascinating to note that just before Jesus rebuked Peter he turned and looked at his disciples. It is as if Jesus is putting 2 & 2 together & realized the disciples have put Peter up to this. It is a perilous moment in the life of Christ. He must dispel this error from their minds & teach them the meaning of his mission. He rejected Peter outright calling him a tool of Satan saying, "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Jesus is up against a formidable foe. But the foe is not Peter, it's not the Sanhedrin or Pontius Pilate or Rome. This formidable foe is Satan disguised as a powerful enemy of Jesus--our quest for positions of rank & status. To address the confusion Jesus pulled his disciples together & brought them before a crowd. In front of the crowd he corrected the disciples aspirations for privilege, rank, and power & he gave them this simple directive: "You must take up your cross & follow me." I would like to ask the question "Why must we carry a cross?" and give three reasons we must do so.

1. We must carry a cross to remind us that we are not the center of the Universe, that our suffering is part of our discipleship as Christians. It is characteristic of great leaders to make demands upon their followers. When Winston Churchill became Prime Minister he told the British people that he had nothing to offer them but "blood, toil, tears, and sweat." The Italian freedom fighter Giuseppe Garibaldi told his followers that he offered them only hunger and death. These were demanding leaders, but Jesus was a thousand times more demanding than they were. Jesus said, "So, therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." Possession cannot stand between you and the Lord. Even something as noble as the love of family, as good and right as that is, cannot stand in the way of commitment to the Kingdom of God. Laziness, fear, selfishness, family--nothing can stand between us and the call to discipleship. Jesus Christ demands our obedience. Jesus comes to us as the Lord of History and makes His demand: Take up your cross and follow me. He comes to us as one to be obeyed.

During the dark days of World War II, England had a great deal of difficulty keeping men in the coal mines. It was a thankless kind of job, totally lacking in any glory. Most men chose to join the various military services. They desired something that could give them more social acceptance and recognition. Something was needed to motivate these men in the work that they were doing so that they would remain in the mines.

With this in mind, Winston Churchill delivered a speech one day to thousands of coal miners, stressing to them the importance of their role in the war effort. He did this by painting for them a mental picture. He told them to picture the grand parade that would take place when VE Day came. First, he said, would come the sailors of the British Navy, the ones who had upheld the grand tradition of Trafalgar and the defeat of the Armada. Next in the parade would come the pilots of the Royal Air Force. They were the ones who had saved England from the dreaded German Luftwaffe. Next in the parade would come the Army, the ones that had stood tall at the crises of Dunkirk. Last of all, he said, would come a long line of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in miners' caps. Someone, he said, would cry from the crowd, "And where were you during the critical days of the struggle?" Then from ten thousand voices would come, "We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal." We are told that there were tears in the eyes of many of those soot-laden & weathered-faced coal miners. They had been given a sense of their own self-worth by the man at the top.

Service does not always come with big fancy ribbons. It is true, that the humble acts of service that provide us with the deepest sense of joy and the most fulfilling satisfaction. Jesus said those who are willing to lose their life for my sake shall find it. I am sure that true discipleship is found in the coal mines with our cross upon our backs.

2. We must carry a cross to remind us that there are others who suffer and that we must fight for justice in the lives of others. All around us there are wrongs that we must correct. The cross we carry is our reminder of that fact. Sometimes, like Peter, we Christians have claimed that it was God's will. We need to ask for forgiveness for a millennium of atrocities, from the Crusades to the Inquisition. Though it may take time, if we keep carrying the cross, we may learn that others suffer as we do and that sometimes even we ourselves are perpetrators of the hatred and violence which others suffer. We carry a cross to remind us that others suffer.

3. And we must carry a cross to remind us that we are responsible in part for the cross that Jesus carried. When Rembrandt painted his famous work of the crucifixion called "The Three Crosses" which now hangs in the Louvre in Paris he did something unusual. Among the faces in the crowd beneath the cross, he painted himself. That was his way of saying that he could not envision the crucifixion without admitting that he had a part in it. Unfortunately, there are some who never see that. They identify with the Christ on the cross, rather than the Rembrandt in the crowd. That haunting old Negro spiritual gives the refrain "Were you there when they crucified my Lord." The emphasis is on the you. If we were to be perfectly honest, we would have to answer yes, I was there. Yes, I had a role in this. It is only as we come to that understanding that we can then sing the last part of the hymn: "Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble."

“Take up your cross and follow me.” Jesus does not simply want us to remember his cross as something he himself suffered on our behalf. If he did he would have simply said take up MY cross and follow me. Instead he told us to take up our own cross. I think by that he meant that I must so identify with the event of the crucifixion as to see myself in the story. It is not simply His story; it is our story as well. I think that is it most tragic if we go through this entire Lenten season and never fully understand our role in the whole crucifixion drama. Why must we carry a cross? To remind us that we must suffer for Christ’s sake, that there are others in this world who suffer, and that ultimately it is our wrongdoing that is responsible for the indignity and shame which Christ suffered upon the cross. But you have a choice. You can lay down the cross you have been given to bear and passively live your life with no challenges or you can take it up and be transformed, living for something greater than yourself. The choice is yours. But I encourage you. Take it Up! Take up your cross, come, and follow Jesus! Amen.