

Pick Up Your Cross and Carry It Into Life

Sunday, February 25, 2018

I

I think it was some sports figure who once said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!”

Well, here at the beginning of our journey into Lent, we come to that fork in the road. 'Cause here, in the eighth chapter of Mark's Gospel, his story of Jesus breaks in half. 'Cause this is where one story, in a way, ends. And this is where the other story begins. I mean, it all depends. It all depends where you're going and which direction you're traveling and who you're gonna follow at this point.

See, Jesus and His disciples are traveling through the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And if you look around, the landscape doesn't look especially eye-catching! But I think if you drop a ball in the first part of Mark's eighth chapter, it bounces back to Galilee where the story of Jesus began ... you know, with Jesus exorcizing demons, defeating evil, healing, calming storms at sea ... and so on. But if you drop a ball right here in this part of the eighth chapter, it rolls all the way to Jerusalem, all the way to the foot of the cross and death.

So now the disciples have come to that fork in the road and yes ... they want to take it. They do want to follow Jesus, OK; after all, they've tramped around for three years, trailing after Him, sitting at His feet, listening to His words. Oh, they want to follow Jesus all right. But the way Jesus now begins to chart squeezes their hearts right up into their throats.

'Cause I mean, suffering, rejection, death ... who would choose that way? No one. So they want to follow Jesus ... yes. And they don't want to follow Jesus. And so they've come to that fork in the road and they want to take it. And I'll just bet also that some of those who'd been trailing along behind Jesus just slipped off into the night along about here.

But Peter, now Peter – what a guy! Peter seems definitely not to want to part ways. So Peter tries to negotiate. See, Peter's seen the crowds build ... seen the crush of bodies grow daily around Jesus. Seen what Jesus could do. I mean, Jesus was becoming a superstar! But now ... just as Jesus seems to have hit His stride, just now He delivers a body blow to His followers ... to His disciples and to the crowds that crush around Him. Says, “I'm going to die ... and it's gonna be bloody, gonna be painful, gonna be humiliating. And so I don't want you to be fooled. 'Cause if you follow me, you're gonna be killed too, one way or another.” But He also says, “Hear this: God is in the middle of this ... in the middle of all this dying ... this dying that does, in the end, lead to life.”

See, Jesus has come to this fork, and has apparently made His choice, a choice that Peter doesn't want to make. And so all of a sudden, Jesus looks vulnerable. And all of a sudden, Peter knows in his bones that if he follows that path, he's gonna be vulnerable too. Knows that he's gonna' die too, one way or another. So apparently Peter's stunned. And so he tries to negotiate. Mark says he “rebukes” Jesus, tries to take control of the situation, tries to make Jesus see reason. And maybe ... here's the thing. Here's the thing: just maybe, for a minute or two, Jesus is tempted to take that easy path, that fork that leads

to the easy way ... to run, to hightail it out of there to save His own hide. But in the end He won't. He can't. No, He's been called by God, and so He'll walk down that path opening up before Him – walk that path to its grim end.

So I guess Jesus does see Peter as a kind of Satan ... a tempter ... and tells him to get out of His face. Says, "Get behind me Satan!" And you know, this is the harshest rebuke Jesus gives anyone in all the gospels. Maybe ... maybe as a mark of just how tempted Jesus is ... there is something in Him that wants desperately to live.

But here's the thing. I suspect that He also glimpses something of God's Light ... something ... that lies behind and beyond that cross ... and I think somehow Jesus sees ... just knows that He has to walk toward that Light to finally live.



Well, some passages of Scripture are just hard to grasp, aren't they? I mean, hard to take in ... hard to know the meaning of the words, tricky to figure out the right meaning. But on the other hand, it seems to me that these verses are, in a way, simple. Direct. I mean in a way, there's nothing confusing; nothing complicated at all about this passage. Jesus' invitation here is absolutely clear.

Someone once said, "When Jesus bids to you follow Him, He bids you to come and die." But the question, then, is how do I die in order to live? And what's it mean that if I lose my life for God's sake, I'll save it? What's it mean to pick up my cross and carry it? How do I do that? What's it mean to be a disciple of Christ?

II

Well of course, we know what it meant for Jesus to walk down this path to the cross. So let's think about that cross for a minute. See in those days, a cross had no religious meaning. Hardly! No, it was just the Romans' preferred mode of execution. See, whole roadways would be lined with dead and dying bodies hanging on those cross beams ... scaring those who walked by ... intimidating, terrifying the onlookers.

And see, I guess Peter was deathly afraid of that path Jesus chose when they came to that fork in the road. Peter was deathly afraid. But I think by Jesus not running ... by defying the Roman powers ... by walking to His death ... Jesus told his followers, by His choice, that there were actually worse things than fear of dying. 'Cause maybe worse than that fear was cringing in fear, letting fear run your life, of running and running ... 'til you come to the end and discover that you've never lived at all.

But there's a choice here, Jesus says. Instead of listening to that panicky voice inside telling you to run, listen to His voice that says, "Follow me ... and do not be afraid. I do not promise you safety. But I do promise you ... life."

So again: what's it mean to follow Christ?

III

A few years back, I read about a truck driver who was killed in Texas. James Thompson was his name ... a white truck driver I believe he was. And apparently he walked into a diner late one night with a trucker friend of his who happened to be black. And as the two of them made their way across the parking lot, a man and a woman in a car began shouting racial slurs.

Well, the black truck driver friend did his best to ignore the curses. But now Mr. Thompson – Mr. Thompson started to argue with that couple. And a few minutes later, as Thompson walked away from their car and began to head toward the diner, the couple raced their car to the other end of the parking lot, spun it around, floored the accelerator, and ran Thompson down. And ... well ... a few days later he died from his injuries.

Now you could say, like Jesus, Thompson faced down evil in that circumstance ... and it cost him his life. Maybe something like those three teachers in Parkland, Florida, who lost their lives shielding those students.

But now I don't suppose many of us here this morning are gonna die for doing the right thing. But here's my point. There are lots of ways to get run over, aren't there? And lots of crosses to bear ... if you just look.

But first let me make clear what I'm not talking about here. What I'm not talking about, obviously, is putting up with the little trivial annoyances that come your way. You know, like that jerk who cuts you off in traffic ... or like a telemarketer interrupting my dinner ... and that's just my little cross to bear. No.

And I'm not saying that you have to put up with abuse or go out of your way to suffer injustice in silence. No. Jesus was pretty clear about healing and justice and freedom from suffering. So we're not talking about suffering for suffering's sake. But then what are we talking about here?

Well let's think. Let's think about the cross. 'Cause I think you can consider the cross from two angles that really, in the end, become one after all. 'Cause they both involve dying to that selfish, craven core ... that side of Peter that prefers my safety first, that fears my suffering, my pain, my death more than anything else.

So first, like that trucker, James Thompson, I believe there can be no faithful following of Christ that ignores the people Christ came to save. There can be no praising Christ without honoring God's purpose, God's justice. 'Cause there can be no serving Christ without serving the people He died for, no loving Christ without loving and caring for those He came to save.

And so I do believe that by loving the least of these, you discover the real, deeper meaning of your life. And you know what? I think when you live on the other side of the cross from Peter ... following a

crucified Christ, no matter the circumstance ... you can have hope. 'Cause when it looks as though sin and injustice and suffering and death have the last word, those who follow a crucified Christ come to know better. I mean, you know not only the horror of the cross, but you also can know the joy of Easter Morning life ... of, "Well done, faithful servant!"

And so ... my point: you know in your soul that the One who calls you to take up your cross is going with you all the way to the end. Which brings me to the second way to view your cross and mine.

Maybe your cross doesn't have much to do with standing up to Roman authorities ... or to bigots throwing racial slurs in a parking lot ... or to a broken killer with a gun ... but maybe your own personal cross is – in the end – fear ... fear of suffering ... fear of dying. I mean, fear is timeless, isn't it? And my guess is that each of us has something that we're deathly afraid of. Maybe it's the fear of a deadly addiction. Or maybe it's the fear of telling the truth about yourself to folks who are going to damn you for it. Maybe it's the fear of being diagnosed with something that can't be cured ... or the fear of someone you love being diagnosed with something that's gonna kill 'em.

Whatever scares you to death, whatever it is that you would give anything in the world to escape from; well, trust me; that's your cross. And Jesus bids you to bend over, pick it up, and carry it to the end.



So – two angles on the cross. Resisting the evil that surrounds you as best you can ... or resisting the urge to run away by picking up that cross that's already lying at your feet. Either way, it's a kind of crucifixion. But if you don't stand up, or if you don't pick it up ... if you slink, scurry or run away ... you deny God the chance to show you that right down in the middle of your worst fear ... is the path to life.



Let me end on this note: whatever that night terror is ... that's the cross you've got. And so that's the cross you've got to hoist and carry. Because if you leave it lying at your feet, you'll stumble over it for sure, and it's probably gonna cripple you in the end.

Jesus says, "Go on, pick it up, and come on with Me, and I'll show you the path to life." Peter preferred to avoid that bad news ... wanted to pretend that he could have life without death. But Jesus knew better than anyone. And Jesus knows better. He promises you and me that our death ... in all its forms ... is the only route to life. And what will you give in return for that?

Amen.



Resources Used: Interpretation Bible Commentary, *Mark*, by Lamar Williamson Jr.; Synthesis for February 25th, Lent 2, "Following in Jesus' Way," and Barbara Brown Taylor's *Home By Another Way*.