

Lent 2, February 25, 2024

**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. He was speaking plainly to them. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But 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.”** He 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. For 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. After all, what good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? In 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.”**

Peter goes from one of his finest moments to one of his worst pretty quickly.

Jesus had just asked his disciples who people said that he was. His disciples ran down the list: Some were saying John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others, one of the prophets. “But what about you?” Jesus had asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter spoke up: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And it is precisely in the wake of this beautiful confession that Jesus decides to teach them a huge point in Christian theology—what we call the theology of the cross, the necessity of Christ’s suffering and death on the cross and the necessity of our suffering in his wake, so to speak. No sooner has Jesus introduced this concept than Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him: “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”

And in response Jesus turns and looks at his disciples and rebukes Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have your mind set on the things of God, but the things of men.” Peter has gone from one of his finest moments to one of his worst, just like that.

But if Peter has his mind set on the things of men, then it shouldn’t surprise us if we find ourselves as humans thinking the same way. Suffering, losing life, for the Son of God himself and for his followers? Does this make sense? If Jesus is the Son of God from God’s own right hand in heaven, shouldn’t his life be one resounding success after another? Shouldn’t he be going from one high point to the next? And shouldn’t the lives of those who follow him look the same?

But it was when Peter expressed such thoughts that Jesus harshly rebuked him: “You do not have your mind set on the things of God, but the things of men.” As God said through the prophet Isaiah, “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

This morning Jesus wants to teach us to stop thinking our own way and to think God’s way instead.

Jesus starts out by teaching us God’s thoughts with regard to himself: “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.”

Let's start with this: "Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things..." It was *necessary* for Jesus to suffer, to be rejected, and to die. Why was it necessary?

What makes things necessary for us? Sometimes we will say, "I *need* to have that," or, "I *need* to do this or that," when what we mean is, "I really, really *want* to have that or to do this or that. Having this or doing that would make me happy, and so I consider it a high priority." But things done for pleasure are not truly necessary. Usually, if something is truly necessary for us, it is because that necessity has been imposed on us from outside of us, either by nature itself or by some other power or authority more powerful than we are.

For instance, food, air, and water are necessary for us because the natural laws that govern the world in general and our bodies in particular would have it so. It is necessary for us to grow old and die, unless death takes us prematurely. That is not our voluntary decision, but something imposed on us by nature after the fall into sin. It is necessary for us to pay taxes, because it's the law of our government and God himself stands behind it.

But Jesus is true God, and so no necessity can be imposed upon him from outside of him. The laws of nature that impose necessities on us are laws he put in place, laws he controls. And no necessity can be imposed on him from a higher authority, because he is the highest authority. As the psalmist says, "God does whatever pleases him." Jesus is absolutely independent.

What does that lead us to conclude? The only things that can be necessary for him, the only things he must do, are those things which he imposes upon himself—not necessities from the outside, but necessities from the inside.

In other words, Jesus has to suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law and be killed not because *they* wanted it that way. They of course *did* want it that way, but that isn't why Jesus has to undergo those things. He has to undergo them because *he* wants it that way, and no other way.

And yes, he also wants to rise again after he dies, and so he must, but think about how that will happen: He will only rise *after* he has suffered all these things. And he will suffer many things, be rejected, and be killed at the hands of the most important people of the city of Jerusalem, in front of virtually everybody, on the busiest day of the year. His resurrection itself? The moment his lifeless lungs begin heaving again? The moment his dead eyes open and he stands up from his bed in the tomb? Witnessed only by himself. The fact of his resurrection and life will be witnessed by hundreds, but the resurrection itself will be witnessed only by the one who rose.

These are God's thoughts with regard to Jesus. Is it any wonder that Paul would write, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," and that Christ crucified was "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles"? Is it any wonder that Peter rebuked Jesus and told him this was beneath him?

But then, after rebuking Peter, Jesus doesn't leave things go and remain silent for a while. He actually calls the crowd to him, along with his disciples, and tells them about God's similar thoughts with regard to us: "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

Jesus essentially says, "Guess what? I'm not the only one who needs to carry a painful cross. All my followers do too." Only he doesn't say, "all my followers." He says, "If *anyone* wants to follow me, let *him* deny *himself*, take up *his* cross, and follow me." His point isn't that

this is only for his male followers; his point is that this is for each and every one of them. You can't just hide in the crowd and say, "Well, Jesus's followers as a whole don't have it so good, so Jesus's words are fulfilled and maybe I myself will escape having to carry the cross." No, Jesus says, "If *anyone*..." There are no exceptions.

And saying that each of us has to carry our cross would all by itself indicate that this isn't going to be a walk in the park. The cross was an instrument of pain and punishment, as we see from Jesus's crucifixion. But on top of that, Jesus has to go and spell out what carrying our cross means: It means denial of self. It means, as he puts it, losing our life.

Apart from Jesus, our life is all about self. Think about it: What does human happiness consist of, apart from Christ? Isn't it all about the promotion and pleasing of self? Isn't it about getting what I want? Isn't it all about the triumph of my will over that of others? Some of the first words that we learn to speak, if not the first, we learn to speak because we figure out that's how we can make known what we want. And this natural exaltation of self is one of the main reasons why death is so feared. Death is the ultimate defeat of self. For one thing, I cannot stop death from coming, and for another, once it comes, I cannot have my way anymore.

An egomaniac really isn't a maniac at all, is he? What makes him a maniac in the eyes of the world is that he hasn't figured out how to turn the volume down on self. He hasn't figured out that, in order to get what you want, you need to do two things: First, you need to make compromises to one extent or another. After all, if everyone is trying to get what they want, then no one is going to get every last little thing that he wants, and so in order to get anything that one wants, one needs to be willing to concede some of the things on his list of self to others. You need to settle for something or you won't get anything. And second, you need to disguise your intentions for promoting and pleasing yourself in order to make those intentions more palatable to others; otherwise they won't cooperate with you in helping you to get what you want. Those are the only reasons we call such a person an egomaniac. If he had figured out those two things, we would just call him a human being.

But Jesus says, as a follower of him, the promotion and pleasing of self must go out the window. Yes, everything that life was all about before becoming acquainted with Jesus must go out the window. That's what Jesus means by losing our life for him and for the gospel.

If we were to sum up what our cross is, we could say that it is any and all self denial for the sake of Jesus and his word. It is not all suffering, period. There is suffering we have in this life simply as a result of our fallen human condition. And there is suffering we undergo as a direct consequence of our own sin. This suffering is not the Christian cross. The Christian cross is suffering and self denial and losing one's life for the sake of Jesus and his word.

This primarily takes three forms. First, it takes the form of other-service and other-centeredness instead of self-service and self-centeredness. It serves one's fellowman in love, putting his or her needs or interests before our own. It doesn't show others love for praise or reward, or in some sort of calculation to get what we want later on down the road. It shows love simply because it's what is best for the other and because it gives glory to God.

Second, it takes the form of embracing and trusting the word of Christ even when our reason and senses and old Adam contradict it. It means trusting that God is our greatest friend even when he appears to be our worst enemy. It means that when my sinful heart cries out, "How can you believe in a God who lets such things happen? How can he be a loving God?" my new

heart cries out at the same time, “Yet I do believe in him and I know he is not just loving, but love itself.”

And third, it takes the form of confessing and trusting in Jesus and his word in what he calls an adulterous and sinful generation. It means bearing up under the ridicule and persecution the world aims at us for not being ashamed of Jesus and his gospel, even if it means being put on an actual cross, as ironically Peter himself eventually was.

These are God’s thoughts with regard to us.

Why would we get on board with such thoughts? Wouldn’t it be better to stay on the path of self than to follow Jesus’s path?

Notice, friends, that Jesus talks about his cross first, and separately from ours. That’s because there are some big differences between his cross and ours. Christ bore his cross perfectly; his Father’s will, not his own, was always paramount. In fact, I shouldn’t say that. I should say his Father’s will always *was* his own. Christ’s cross also didn’t involve any struggle with his old Adam, because he didn’t have an old Adam. His cross came entirely from outside himself. The burden he bore was really ours, not his. And that leads to the last major difference: His cross accomplished something ours never will and does not have to—our redemption and deliverance from sin, death, and hell.

Our cross isn’t necessary to earn eternal life. Eternal life has already been earned and won. Our cross is rather a necessary consequence of Christ’s cross. It’s a privilege and a gift from God that drives us back to Christ’s cross again and again. If we weren’t driven back to it, then we would abandon it and forfeit our souls for eternity. But by being driven back to Christ’s cross, the sting is taken out of our cross. Yes, our cross becomes a small reminder of just what Christ was willing to go through for us, so willing that he considered it a must. Yes, over time we learn to love our cross precisely for that reason, and we learn that true happiness is actually found in carrying our cross precisely for that reason. We find that outwardly we may be wasting away, but inwardly we are being made brand new day by day (2 Cor. 4:16).

And just as Jesus knew that the resurrection and eternal life were on the other side of his cross, so the same is true for us. And in fact, our cross and its pain, which will always remain as long as we are on earth, help us to put our real hope and longing where it belongs—with Jesus in heaven and not with self on earth.

Turns out God’s thoughts aren’t so bad after all, are they? “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.” Amen.