

“A Costly Confession”

Mark 8:27-38, Lent 2-B Feb 25, 2018

The “cross”! What comes to mind for you when you hear this word? Perhaps it’s a decorative altar ornament? Or maybe even something that rests on top of a church steeple? Or maybe even a piece of jewelry around a person’s neck?

But if you mentioned the word “cross” to the people of Jesus’ day—there was a completely different image that would have come to their minds immediately! Why? Because too many times they had seen the roads leading into the major cities of the Roman Empire—lined with wooden stakes; wooden stakes with the human bodies of the enemies of Rome nailed to them!

In Jesus’ day, more than 100 men had been crucified at Caesarea Philippi at one time, although mass crucifixions took place on a much smaller scale too!

It has been estimated that some 30,000 crucifixions would have been carried out as a detail duty of Roman soldiers during those 33 years that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ walked among us in his state of humiliation upon this earth!

Brothers and sisters, from a PUBLIC RELATIONS STANDPOINT our Lord and Savior Jesus was ahead of his time by his—choosing an emblem, a symbol, if you please, to become the trademark of a new movement that he was beginning.

If the “Golden Arches” is the symbol for McDonalds and a “Castle” is the symbol for Disney World, a cross has long been the most popular symbol for all things “Christian!”

Nevertheless, however, if Jesus was out to attract as many followers as he could, it seems that he chose the ONE EMBLEM that would have been the greatest “turn off” for the most people possible in that first century world!

For when Jesus said: *“Take up your cross and follow me,”* they knew exactly what he meant! The cross was the most painful, humiliating and disgraceful thing imaginable in Jesus’ day and the one thing that everyone wanted to avoid!

My brothers and sisters, the most difficult words that Jesus ever spoke are NOT the ones that are hard to understand, but the ones that are easy to understand but extremely difficult to obey!

Our Gospel lesson this morning begins at verse 27: *“As Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”*

And here is one of those occasions in Jesus’ ministry when everyone who was present—seemed to be in the know!

The personal pronoun used here is the 3rd person plural form of that verb to tell: *“They!”* Collectively *they* told Jesus, *“John the Baptist, and other say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets!”*

In other words, Jesus of Nazareth was already regarded by most people living in Palestine at that time as being a “great guy!” These people would have had no trouble singing the words of that song written by Arthur Reid Reynolds in 1966 but made much more popular when they were rerecorded by the Doobie Brothers in 1972, entitled: “Jesus Is Just Alright by Me!”

Do you remember the lyrics to that song?

**Jesus is just alright with me, Jesus is just alright oh yeah;
Jesus is just alright with me, Jesus is just alright with me!**

Then Jesus asked his disciples: “But who do you say that I am?”

This time, Jesus’ 12 disciples do not answer our Lord’s question in unison! Why? I can’t say for sure! But perhaps even at this late date in Jesus’ 3-year ministry, there were still some of Jesus’ disciples, who still had not able to put 2 and 2 together!

But Peter, good-ole impetuous Peter: Well, he never seemed to be at a loss for words! Peter answers: “You are the Christ!” And no sooner do these words spring forth from Peter’s mouth, when Jesus strictly ordered everyone present, “*Not to tell anyone about him*” (Mark 8:29)!

Say what? Don’t Jesus’ words deeply puzzle us here?

Why should there be all this secrecy about the identity of Jesus! Rather than Jesus encouraging his disciples to share this news with everyone they could—our Lord put a gag order on them instead! If great numbers of people suddenly came to believe that Jesus was God’s anointed Son, how in the world, could this had been a bad thing?

And yet you and I know the answer to this question! For centuries the Jews had prayed that God would raise up for them a new anointed one, a new king like David, who would lead them and their people, by defeating their oppressors and reestablishing the kingdom of Israel. But our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ understood full-well that this was not the kind of Messiah our Heavenly Father had sent him into our world to become!

Instead, he would become the “SUFFERING SERVANT” type of Messiah that the Prophet Isaiah speaks about at length, at four different places in that Old Testament Book of prophecy of 66 chapters that bears his name: In chapters 42, 47, 49 and 53!

“And Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days, rise again! And Jesus said this plainly” (Mark 8:31)!

But what is the first thing that Peter does; the very same Peter who had just identified Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah?

Mark tells us that Peter takes Jesus aside from the others and begins to “rebuke” Jesus! The word that is translated “rebuke” here is a very strong word. It is the same word the New Testament used when Jesus rebuked unclean spirits to come out of people demon-possessed! And yet what are we to really make out of this unusual exchange that takes place here between Peter and Jesus?

St Matthew shares with us Peter’s very words, who says: “*Far be it from you Lord, this shall never happen to you*” (Mt. 16:22)! Then St Mark tells us what follows: “*But turning and seeing his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man’*” (Mark 8:33)!

It certainly seems to me that there are some very sharp words being exchanged here between Peter and Jesus and between Jesus and Peter, and yet Jesus is certainly not sinning against Peter; for Jesus never sinned; and I want to believe that Peter was not really sinning against Jesus either, though I can’t say this for sure!

Perhaps, Peter was not sinning against Jesus if the words he spoke towards Jesus were being spoken much more out of his true spirit of love FOR JESUS that Peter than anything else!

It certainly seems to me that Jesus became angry with Peter, and it is possible that Peter was angry with Jesus, because of what Jesus had just said! But there are several INSTANCES I can think of in the Gospels when the New Testament writers point out that Jesus was angry!

Jesus certainly was angry on that day when he cleansed the temple and turned over the tables of the money changers and sent those men PACKING—BECAUSE, IN JESUS WORDS, THEY HAD TAKEN HIS FATHER’S HOUSE OF PRAYER AND TURNED IT INTO A DEN OF THIEVES because

they were practicing “price gauging” and making such enormous profits by selling their sacrificial animals in the temple courtyard!

St. Paul says in Ephesians 4:26: “*Be angry but do not sin and do not let the sun go down on your anger!*” What Jesus said must have initially angered Peter and what Peter said must have angered Jesus too!

If “Jesus Is Just Alright with Me” is a song that was made popular by the Doobie Brothers in 1972, there is another song that was written and recorded by a man named Clarence Henry in the USA in 1962 entitled: “YOU ALWAYS HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE!”

This song became so popular that it has been rerecorded over 30 times by leading male and female vocalists throughout our nation; by such musical artists as: Connie Francis, the Lennon Sisters, Peggy Lee, Pat Boone, Ringo Star and Willie Nelson. Do you remember the lyrics?

You always hurt the one you love; the one you shouldn't hurt at all!
You always take the sweetest rose and crush it till the petals fall!
You always break the kindest heart, with a hasty word you can't recall, so
If I broke your heart last night—it's because I love you most of all!

Every husband and wife, every mother and father, brother and sister and son and daughter—knows the sad reality of the unfortunate truth that this song expresses.

With other, more casual acquaintances, you and I are most often polite, restrained and even reserved. With others, the tight-lipped smile appears! You exchange the normal niceties that the given-socials norms in our day continues to expect of you and me—and then you part company with those other people as quickly and gracefully as you can!

But if it's a husband or wife, a brother or sister, a parent or child who has just said something to you that you really don't appreciate at all---then to use another worn-out colloquialism you may “just let that other person have it!” Maybe this is the sort of thing that is taking place in this rather heated conversation between Peter and Jesus in our Gospel lesson this morning! Jesus and this brawny fisherman have a very special friendship. They've traveled together, the length and breadth of Palestine.

M. Scott Peck, a noted Christian psychologist, once said: “A true gentleman never hurts the feelings of another person, unless he does so intentionally!” In other words, there are times when for the sake of love, we may speak to another person using some words that we realize will be difficult for that other person to hear; although if we love that other person, we believe these hard words are necessary for them to hear—with respect to their own welfare and with respect to the welfare of others whose lives surround their own!

THE WORDS OF JESUS JUST SPILL OUT OF HIS MOUTH: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected, be killed ... and after three days, rise again!”

I'd like to think that what Peter says next to Jesus, he says out of love, but we should never forget that there were times when Peter, just like the rest of us, could be self-centered and totally preoccupied with his own needs!

Peter, in other words “SIMPLY LOSES IT” and “LET'S JESUS HAVE IT!” Peter, Mark tells us, “*Began to rebuke Jesus!*” Matthew shares with us Peter's very words, “*God forbid, Lord, this shall never happen to you*” (Matthew 16:22)!

In Peter's case this is the spontaneous outburst of a man in deep denial, who's just heard hard news he can't digest.

WHAT REALLY INTRIGUES ME HERE, HOWEVER, IS THAT MARK DOES NOT TELL US THAT JESUS LOOKED AT PETER, BUT THAT: *“Turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Mark 8:33)!*

For Jesus, the cross that was awaiting him in Jerusalem was far from optional. The statement that the Son of Man MUST SUFFER MANY THINGS POINTS TO THE OVERRULING PURPOSE OF GOD AND REFLECTS JESUS' CONVICTION THAT THE INTENTION REVEALED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES WOULD ONLY ATTAIN ITS FULFILLMENT IN THE SHAME OF HIS CRUCIFIXION—ALTHOUGH THAT SHAME WOULD BE FOLLOWED UP IN THE TRIUMPH OF OUR LORD'S RESURRECTION!

Jesus' profession of his impending death and resurrection was a costly confession for him to make. It was costly for him because it meant that God the Father would make Jesus to become sin for us, who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God through him! Our confession of Jesus to be the Promised Messiah, the long-awaited Savior of the world is always a COSTLY CONFESSION FOR US TOO! WHY?

Because we must rid ourselves of all our false human pride that there is some way, somehow, that we could mend our broken relationship with God that has been severed by our sin and disobedience.

But Jesus tells us something else, here, too! There is a cost to our discipleship. *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life” (Mark 10:25-36)?*

But please notice my friends that this is NOT A CROSS THAT YOU HAVE TO BEAR, UNLESS YOU WANT TO BECOME ONE OF JESUS' TRUE DISCIPLES!

Oh, we've all heard the misappropriation of this concept that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is speaking to us—about here! People sometimes say of any difficulty they are encountering in their lives: *“It's just the cross I have to bear!”*

Yet most of the time when we hear this phrase used, it's used improperly. People often use it to refer to something they had ABSOLUTELY NO CHOICE IN; SUCH THINGS AS A SERIOUS ILLNESS, OF GETTING DOWNSIZED OUT OF A JOB OR EVEN GETTING BULLIED BY OTHER KIDS AT SCHOOL.

These things are a far cry from Jesus' words here in the eighth chapter of Mark: *“Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

Notice that the first thing that must happen here is the disciple's willingness to take this step: *“If any want to become my followers!”*

Nobody wants to get sick or lose a job or get bullied; but unfortunately, these things may happen to us! Jesus idea of cross-bearing is of a whole different order. No, we take it upon ourselves, knowing that, in so doing, we help others!

It may mean taking on some task, that you could just as easily leave unattended to—but something you are doing—to benefit others, to help them and strengthen them in some way: Whether it is becoming involved in some aspect of the church's ministry—or living sacrificially—devoting your time, talents and treasures to help spread the good news of Jesus Christ to as many people as we possibly can.

It may be serving as a Stephen Minister, serving on the Board of Elders, or taking upon yourself some capacity of leadership in the Church—you could, from the perspective of others, just

as easily say “NO!” too. But you are of the mind of the Apostle Paul when he says in 2 Corinthians 5:14, *“For the love of Christ controls us...”*

But to truly follow Jesus, means that we follow him voluntarily also—all the way to the cross—to see the price he paid there—and to see him as the ONLY ONE who possibly could have paid the price of our redemption.

When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died!
My richest gain I count as loss and pour contempt on all my pride!
Forbid it Lord that I should boast, save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most; I sacrifice them to his blood!”

AMEN