JESUS, YOU’LL BE THE DEATH OF ME

Mark 8:27-38

Whitewood/Lead, September 12, 2021

There was once small plane with 5 passengers on it. Halfway to their destination, the engines started sputtering and failing. The pilot came out from behind the curtain wearing a parachute pack on his back. He said, "friends, I have some bad new and some good news. The bad news is we have an engine malfunction and we're going down. The good news is there are several parachutes here along the wall. The bad news is that there are 5 of you and only 4 parachutes. So, you'll have to work it out among yourselves. "I know you have many choices in air travel and so I'd like to thank you for choosing our airline and wish you a very pleasant evening -- wherever your final destination may be." With that, he was out the door. A woman leapt up; "I am one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the northeast. My patients depend on me." She grabbed a parachute pack and leaped out. A man stood up and said, "I am an attorney in a large law practice and the office would fall to pieces without me." He grabbed a parachute pack and leapt out. Another man stood up and said, "I am purported to be the smartest man in the world. My IQ is so high I don't even want to mention it for fear it would make you feel bad." He grabbed a pack and leapt out. There were only two people left on the plane now, a middle age Presbyterian Pastor and a teenage boy. "Son, said the minister; "you take the last parachute. You're young. You have your whole life ahead of you. I've had a good run, and I'll take the fall on this one. God bless you and safe landing." The teenager looked up at the older man. "Thanks, pastor. That means a lot to me, really. But there are still two parachutes. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my backpack!"

Sometimes these days we may feel we are flailing about mid-air, hoping to clinging to something real and true and trustworthy that allows us to move ahead with a life of purpose following God’s plan. But the point this morning is, we had better hope we grasp the right parachute!

Did you know that there is only one verse in the gospels of the New Testament where Jesus repeats himself 6 times? Today we hear Mark’s version of what Jesus said; in chapter 8:34-35. It is one of the greatest verses from the heart, and lips of Jesus. And since we too are his disciples; it is especially important that we know and remember his famous teaching. This Bible verse divides itself into five lines, and what I would like us to do this morning is to have us read this together and take it to heart. So, together, with me, will you repeat after me these 5 verses?

“If anyone would be my disciple; let them deny themselves, (repeat) take up their cross and follow me; (repeat) Whoever finds their life, loses it; (repeat) Whoever loses their life, finds it. (repeat) What does it profit you, if you gain the whole world, and lose your own soul?” (repeat) Think about that. These words were spoken early in Jesus’ ministry, before the Transfiguration. Before Good Friday. So, it was beforeJesus literally took up a cross and died for us.

In all 3 gospels we have this clear admonition from Jesus as to the cost of discipleship. Jesus doesn’t talk in parables about this one, there is no story within a story. There is no hidden meaning or mystery about it. Jesus wants everyone; especially, his disciples, to clearly know that this may not be easy. He says it 6 x’s. “Take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life you must lose it, and those who lose it will save it.” It is the foundation to the Christian faith, yet I wonder if we truly understand what Jesus means.

So, here we have Jesus on his way to (Kay sarea Philipee) Caesarea Philippi (near the Jordan River), that he asks his disciples this question; a question that is designed to examine their fitness as leaders: "Who do others say that I am. And then he asks them; who do you say that I am?" The Greek word for 'you' in this case is plural. So the question is addressed to all of Jesus' followers, which includes us. You see in every generation; this is the defining question concerning our Christian ministry in the world. How do we speak of Jesus? What do our words reveal about our faith concerning him? And yet even more important than our words, what do our public and private actions reveal about our convictions concerning Jesus' true identity? Who do we say that he is in word and deed? (This week I also found myself pondering “who do others say that I am? As a follower of Jesus – who would you say that I am?” (That is the second part of today’s question and maybe just as pertinent.)

You see, in Jesus’ day the cross was not a logo or a symbol or a metaphor. The cross was an instrument of pain, shame and death. It was a real weapon. When Jesus picked up that cross, he did so to definitively set himself against the Roman empire, and the temple authorities. Against the ideology of the world that oppressed and shackled God’s people, and hindered the coming of God’s kingdom. Jesus literally picked up the cross and carried it to his death.

As this gospel was written some forty or so years after Jesus picked up his cross; conflict was still very much everywhere. In Mark’s day the threat of crucifixion was still there. Social, political and religious instability were inescapable. And the fledgling band of Jesus’ followers were caught in the middle; where Neighbors were divided against neighbors and family members against other loved ones. In many cases, not much different from today. It was a difficult, desperate and dangerous time. This line from Mark’s gospel about “cross-bearing” reminded Jesus’ followers, of the very literal ability of a cross to take one’s life, depending on their words and deeds. But this line spoken by Jesus also reminded them that the cross offered to help them gain everything (most importantly; eternal life.)

I have heard many people say; “well that is just the cross I have to bear.” Or “he will just have to bear his cross.” Let me be perfectly clear here; crosses are not given to you by God. God does not say; “I am going to give you a cross and you must bear it.” Jesus does say however; “if you want to gain eternal life then take up your cross and follow me.” This is not the same thing as bearing a burden. If your child dies, or you get ill, or you lose your job, these things can feel like a burden that happened to you due to life circumstances. God did not give them to you. That is not your cross to bear. Do not cling to it! It is your burden - to lay down. If you choose to take up your cross and follow Jesus, you can lay down your burden at Jesus feet, and turn that burden into a cross which you pick up with faith. You willingly make a choice to pick it up like Jesus did and in so doing it is no longer your burden.

There are so many great true-life examples I can give you this morning of people who have laid down their burden and “died to themselves” – given up their parachute for another. One very popular true-life examples of “picking up your cross and follow me” that I can think of, (next to Jesus’ demonstration), is the true story of the woman who lost her daughter when she was killed by a drunk driver; that of Candy Lightener. This was a terrible burden for this mother to bear, and yet she said she almost immediately died to herself and turned her grief around, turning it into a cross and named it MADD. Mothers Against Drunk Driving.” She too was able to lay her anger at the foot of the cross. She worked tirelessly to help prevent this from happening to other families by carrying this new cross called MADD.

Perhaps one of the most famous stories of a Christian picking up their cross is that of Deitrick Bonhoeffer, the German theologian. During World War II, he could have stayed safely in New York and participated in stateside efforts to combat Nazi tyranny, but he chose a path of leadership that took him home to Germany where he became a courageous leader of the church's resistance to Nazi dictatorship. He clearly understood what it meant to lead a life “carrying the cross.” He wrote: “The Cost of Discipleship” and believed; that when Jesus calls a person, he bids that person to die to themselves. Bonhoeffer was a martyr many times over before he was finally executed in a German concentration camp just before the end of WWII. He knew what he was choosing when he openly resisted Hitler. He was one of the bravest witnesses for being a true Christian. Wherever he went and whomever he was with he spoke the truth, with complete absence of fear because he knew life without our God given freedoms, for all people was not the life God intended for him and others. His indestructible faith allowed Dietrich Bonhoeffer to face death as a martyr, secure in the promise that his life was not in vain. He was undaunted in choosing the cross and was executed for his convictions.

Harriet Tubman was a brave woman who escaped slavery during the Civil War. Despite a huge reward for her capture, she returned to the slave-holding states over 19 times to lead hundreds of African-Americans out of slavery's clutches into territory where they could live with liberty. Harriet Tubman was a Christian and she became a great warrior in the battle to dismantle the cruel institution of slavery. When asked about the source of her fearless strength, she would always say: "It wasn't me, it was the Lord. I always told him, ‘I trust you. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me.’ And he always did." Harriet Tubman, the black Moses, was never captured.

There are countless stories like these, and other new stories are being told daily. They are the stories of Christian people who learn to lead because they keep rediscovering what it means to be a follower of Jesus. I think of the 80 million Americans who are being forced into taking a vaccine or they lose their job. I pray for the nurses and doctors taking off their shoes and leaving them at the door on their way out with a note quoting Matthew 6:11 And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” And when the Secretary of defense told the military either get vaccinated or face being court marshalled 12 - F22 pilots who walked off - and all other Govt employees facing such a courageous decision. Leaving the career you built up over the course of a life time. After spending years and thousands of dollars - and without that income you do not know how to feed your family. That is quite a leap of faith and can feel like dying – to oneself – what one felt called to do. And yet there are thousands doing this today. Dying to themselves for their higher convictions.

I have to ask how did these people, these real-life examples of Christian witness do it? How are they different than you or I? How are we to do it? I’ll tell you. It is by God’s grace. By letting ourselves (our egos) die to Christ. There are those on our police force and firemen and women; and firemen don’t need someone standing there telling them that respiratory equipment isn’t powerful enough to beat the smoke. And Police officers don’t need to hear fearful whispers that the bullets can pierce body armor. Just as Jesus rebuked Peter this morning for trying to prevent him from facing what he must do. Jesus sets a high standard. Self-denial, taking up the cross and losing one’s life in order to gain it - and following him. Tough stuff.

But this week we are called to ask ourselves who do we say that Jesus is? And what is it that we are grasping for – clinging to – like a parachute. And who do or will others say that we are. I don’t know about you, but, personally, I would never want to found standing in Jesus' way. With God’s help, we can make a way out where there may not seem to be a way – let’s make a way together, so we can stay on God's side. Let us pray for the courage to pay the price of discipleship by dying to ourselves today this week and forever more – living for God and his son Jesus.

Let us pray: We thank you God of continuing revelation and communication, for sending prophets among us – people who have an ability to see things whole, from a high and broad perspective. We than you for prophets who remind us that the accumulation of money and things is not the purpose for our lives here on earth nor the secret of a fulfilling life. We thank you for prophets who dare to speak up on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves and whose voices of despair are drown out by the demands of the rich and powerful. We thank you for prophets who point out for us the evidences of the hand of God and who open our ears to the message of God in a world of earthquake, wind and fire. We thank you for prophets who challenge us and sometimes anger us, yet in whom we reluctantly recognize your living message for us and for our times. We pray for all of those who need your healing mercies today – be with:

Invocation: As we gather in worship, we ask that you will give us the humility which comes from knowing that we have fallen short of your glory. But also give us the confidence which comes from knowing that we can approach you in the name of Jesus.

Benediction: May God grant you a hope that is abiding, a faith that is unfaltering, a joy that is unending, and a vision that is unfading.