

THE CROSS IS NECESSARY

Mark 8:27-38

Second Sunday in Lent (Series B)

February 28, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Second Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 8, verses 27 through 38. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches his disciples what is necessary, both in his life and in theirs. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 8, beginning at verse 27, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, **“Who do people say that I am?”** ²⁸ And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ And he asked them, **“But who do you say that I am?”** Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” ³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

³¹ And he 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. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he 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.”**

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”**

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Some things in life are optional. You go for that second piece of cake, and someone who cares about you says, “Is that really necessary?” And you want to say, “Yes,” but part of growing up involves learning to distinguish between a want and a need. It also involves learning to prioritize what is absolutely necessary over what is merely optional. Sometimes we have to choose between two good things based on what is more necessary. You can spend your evening watching baseball, which is good and fun, or you can spend it cleaning the bathroom, because you have company coming the next day. One of these options is more enjoyable, but the other is more necessary.

In the gospel lesson, Jesus teaches his disciples what is truly necessary, both in his life and in theirs.

This passage marks a turning point in the *Gospel of Mark*. It's about halfway through the book where Jesus sets his face toward the cross. The cross had always been his mission. From

the moment he was conceived, and even from before the foundation of the world, his purpose was to suffer and die for the sins of the world. But there is a turning point in Jesus' ministry here. Up until this point, the gospel deals primarily with Jesus' miracles and some of his teachings. The purpose is to reveal his identity. Now it turns to reveal his mission. So the *Gospel of Mark* can be divided into two sections: first, the revelation of Jesus' identity, and, second, the revelation of Jesus' mission.

The disciples had spent a few years now with Jesus, witnessing his miracles and learning his true identity. But now there's a turning point. Things get more intense. Jesus becomes more focused on the real necessity of his mission.

So he starts quizzing his disciples. First he asked them who other people said he was (8:27). And there were a variety of answers. Some people thought John the Baptist, who was dead by this point (6:14-29). Others thought he was Elijah or one of the prophets (8:28). Apparently people were so amazed by Jesus they thought he must be one of these remarkable individuals, back from the dead. The answers are pretty much everything except the truth. People don't say that he is the Christ and the Son of God.

So Jesus gets more to the point. He asks, **"But who do you say that I am?"** (8:29). It's a question for all twelve of them, so when Peter answers, he's not just answering for himself. The others likely believe the same thing. So Peter says for them all, "You are the Christ" (8:29). And this, of course, is the right answer. This is what Jesus' miracles and teachings were intended to reveal.

The title "Christ" means the same thing as the Hebrew word "Messiah." It means "anointed one." And this identifies the Messiah, or the Christ, as a king. In the Old Testament it was the kings and priests who were anointed. For kings, anointing was the ceremony that inaugurated them as kings. The Jews in Jesus' day rightly understood the Christ to be a descendant of David, and not just any random descendant, but a king—the great king they had been waiting for. This was the common understanding of the Christ. And some Jews, not all of them, but some of them also understood that the Christ would be the Son of God (e.g., Matt. 16:16; 26:63; John 1:49).

All this is wrapped up in Peter's confession, "You are the Christ." Peter is confessing that Jesus is the Son of God in human flesh, who had come as Israel's king to deliver them from their enemies. And Peter was right.

But it soon became apparent that Peter did not really understand who his enemies were. This was the big theological problem in those days, and it still is. If we don't even know who our enemy is, we are in big trouble. The common Jewish opinion was that the Roman Empire was the big enemy. Rome had conquered and still controlled the land of Israel. So if Rome was the enemy, then the work of the Christ must be to drive the Romans out by military force and reestablish the throne in Jerusalem. This, apparently, was what Peter wanted Jesus to do. And so would the rest of the people if they knew who Jesus really was. And this, I think, is why Jesus often commanded people to not tell anyone about him. They would have developed false expectations. Jesus had come to deliver them from more serious enemies than Rome.

We have three enemies which Jesus the Christ came to deliver us from. You've heard me teach this before, and you'll hear me teach it again, because we need to have a realistic understanding of who our enemies are. Our three enemies are sin, death, and the devil. And it's these three enemies that Jesus delivers us from. He delivered us from each of these enemies at the cross. He atoned for sin by taking our sin upon himself. He paid for it and forgives it. That's how he defeats the enemy of sin. And since sin is atoned for, death is also defeated, because

death is the consequence of sin. And without sin, the devil has nothing to accuse us with. The devil is like a prosecuting attorney who is bound by the judge's declaration that we are righteous. He threatens us and accuses us, but it's all empty, because he has no legal case anymore. He is bound by the Word of God. It is these three enemies that Jesus came to deliver us from. And he defeats them all through the cross. When sin is atoned for, death and the devil also lose their power.

And so Jesus taught his disciples what he must do. He "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" (8:31). And Jesus didn't teach this only once. This was the point where Jesus began to teach this. This thing about the cross would become the central part of his teaching from here on out.

But the disciples didn't seem to take it well. Peter, acting on behalf of the Twelve, pulled Jesus aside. And we can kind of understand why. If Peter thought the Romans were the real enemy Jesus, he would never understand why the cross is necessary. The cross looks like a defeat instead of a victory. Victory against the Romans should look more glorious. Jesus should exercise his divine power. Death seems counterproductive. So Peter thought he was helping Jesus, kind of like saying, "Is that really necessary?" But Peter wasn't so polite. He literally rebuked Jesus. And this is so absurd it's funny. As soon as Jesus stops acting and speaking the way Peter expects the Christ to act and speak, he seems to forget who Jesus is. It's like he forgets that he just confessed Jesus to be the Christ. Peter gave in to the theological temptation of glory seeking. He wanted the Jesus who appears all glorious instead of the one who appears weak and shameful.

And we are tempted to fall into this same theological temptation. We desire a god who manifests his glory, and we're kind of ashamed of the true God who reveals himself in suffering and shame, because then this suffering and shame is projected onto us. So we seek a god who manifests his glory, because we forget who our enemies are, and we forget how bad they really are.

We're tempted to think that maybe our enemies are a lack of financial security, so we seek a god who grants prosperity. And we think of a nice house, a nice car, and maybe even a fancy church building as signs of God's favor. Or we think of the other political party as the enemy, so we seek a god who will defeat them in the elections. And if our side wins, then God must be smiling upon us. Or maybe the enemy is boredom, or depression, or bad grades, or whatever you don't like. So victory must be excitement, happiness, intelligence, and all the stuff we like. But our real enemies are still sin, death, and the devil.

A second theological temptation is to underestimate these enemies. And the enemy we most commonly underestimate is our own sin. When we underestimate our sin, we think we can gain the victory simply by modifying our behavior. But if that's the case, then Jesus died in vain. If we can gain the victory over sin, simply by being better, then Peter was right and Jesus was wrong.

But if the enemy is our sin, and if our sin is so bad that it can't simply be corrected, then the death of Jesus is the victory. And if death—not Jesus' death, but our death—if our death is the enemy, then Jesus' death is the victory. And if the devil is the enemy, then Jesus' death is the victory. His death is the only thing that can triumph over these enemies.

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These truly are our three greatest enemies: sin, death, and the devil. They are not enemies we can defeat. We cannot even make the slightest advance against them. We need someone else. We need the Christ to fight and defeat these enemies for us. And so the cross is necessary.

So Jesus does not accept Peter's rebuke. Peter is wrong, and Jesus is right, and Jesus lets Peter know it in no uncertain terms. He says, **"Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man"** (8:33). This is a harsh rebuke. "Satan" is about the worst thing you can call a person. So what's with Jesus calling Peter "Satan"? Is Peter the devil incarnate? Certainly not. Rather, Jesus is identifying the true source of Peter's rebuke. It reminds us of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. One of the things the devil tempted Jesus with was all the kingdoms of the world.

"The devil took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me'" (Matt. 4:8-9).

Jesus did want the kingdoms of the world, but his mission was to gain them by other means. His mission was to purchase them "with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death" (*Small Catechism*, "The Second Article"). The devil's temptation was to sidestep the cross and gain the kingdoms of the world by other means. And Peter's rebuke of Jesus is the same. *Don't take the way of the cross; take the glory road.*

So this thing about Jesus calling Peter "Satan" reminds us of the devil's temptation in the wilderness. The devil tempted Jesus to think the cross was not absolutely necessary. But Jesus didn't go for it, and he's not going to go for it when Peter suggests it. The cross is absolutely necessary, for there is no other way to defeat our enemies.

This must have been difficult for the disciples to hear. Their Lord and God is going to be beaten and humiliated and killed. He will become a bloody, dead mess. But Jesus makes it even more personal. If we hate the cross upon which our Lord and God died, we will hate it even more when that cross becomes our own. But this is what Jesus teaches. **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"** (8:34). These must be about the hardest words in all of Scripture to accept.

What do they mean? Do they mean that the only way to be saved is to be crucified like Jesus? Do we need to find someone willing to nail us to a cross? Some Christians were crucified like Jesus, and we shouldn't be too surprised if this form of execution makes a comeback. But being crucified will not save us from our sins. Jesus' crucifixion accomplished that, and it doesn't need to be redone.

What is necessary is for us to be crucified *with* Christ (Gal. 2:20). And this is exactly what happened in our Baptisms (Rom. 6:3; Col. 2:12). It's not a new crucifixion. It's being joined to Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus instructs us to deny ourselves, and Baptism is exactly that. It is a death to ourselves, so that we might live toward God.

Now, seeing Baptism as the solution to the harshness of this text might seem just a bit too easy. And if we think of Baptism as a singular event that just covers our bases with God, then it is too easy and we've missed the whole point.

But Baptism is not easy at all. Baptism is death, and there's nothing easy about it. Baptism unites us with Christ's death in a way that can't be undone or ignored. What I mean is, it marks us with the cross, and that mark doesn't go away. We assume an entire life of denying ourselves for the sake of Christ. We especially deny our sinful desires. But there's more than that. We also assume all the suffering and shame associated with the cross. The cross becomes the shape of our

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lives. What I mean is, we assume self-denial and sacrifice as a way of life. We may even be criticized or persecuted, and it shouldn't surprise us. As those redeemed by Christ and declared righteous for his sake, we now live to give up ourselves for the sake of Christ and for the benefit of our neighbor, no matter the cost. Instead of Jesus bringing us glory in this life, he does the opposite.

It doesn't sound very appealing, so Jesus reminds us of the eternal benefit. And it's actually quite logical. **“Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”** (8:35-36). If we seek our own glory in this life, we may or may not find it, but we certainly will not find it in eternity. But if we take the cross in this life, if we are called by the name of the rejected one, and we accept whatever that entails, we will follow the Christ not just in this life, and not just in suffering, but also into eternity and the eternal glory of his heavenly kingdom. Because following him does not simply mean to obey his teaching and emulate his example. It also means to follow him through death and into eternal life. When we follow him, we go with him to where he is. So as we share in his sufferings, we shall also share in his glory, because it is coming, and what a glorious day that will be.

The cross is necessary. It was the only way for the Christ to deliver us from our enemies. And he has done this. He has delivered us from sin, death, and the devil. Now as his redeemed people, he calls us to take up our crosses and follow him. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.