

Sermon Text – Sunday, February 25, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; 2nd Reading: Romans 4:13-25
Scripture for Message: Mark 8:31-38 “For the Sake of the Gospel”**

This scripture always leaves me with questions – what does it mean to take up our cross, and what does it mean to be saved? Maybe these are questions that linger from my childhood – I certainly know what salvation in Jesus’ name is and I know what it means for my life. But that does not mean that this scripture no longer has me scratching my head and digging for answers.

Let’s look first at the discourse between Peter and Jesus. By the time we get to chapter eight in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ ministry has progressed rapidly, and his “hour” is getting ever closer. This in fact marks a turning point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus now turns toward the cross. Jesus needs to prepare his disciples by telling them the truth about what will happen and the truth about his ‘cross.’ For Peter this was too difficult a truth to accept, we aren’t told what Peter said to Jesus to ‘rebuke’ him in private. Jesus, by turning to his disciples, made it public and responded by equating Peter’s rebuke with Satan’s temptations. According to Lamar Williamson Jr, in his commentary on this passage, “Peter tempts Jesus to think that God’s anointed can avoid suffering, rejection, and death; that God’s rule means power without pain, glory without humiliation.”¹ These are basically the same temptations that Matthew tells us came from Satan as Jesus wandered in the wilderness. If we go back in Mark’s Gospel, just a few sentences, we can read where Peter has declared Jesus to be the “Christ” meaning the anointed one or the Messiah. But, did he know what that really meant?

Jesus was telling them the truth, but the truth was not what they wanted to hear – Peter denied Jesus’ truth. That is why Peter was rebuked with those words, “Get Behind me, Satan!” In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus uses similar words with Satan when tempted in the wilderness, “Away from me Satan.” Satan is a denier, turning us away from the truths that are hard to hear. Jesus was telling the disciples the truth, yet Peter didn’t want to believe it. Did that make Peter evil – a Satan? Here’s the thing about Satan – Satan is a tempter who does not have power over us to control us, consequently Satan uses others to do the dirty work of tempting us. Satan again is attacking Jesus through the “well-meaning, entirely understandable entreaties of one of his closest friends.”²

But what of Satan, face it Satan is not a horned figure brandishing a trident, but an insidious force undermining love and grace. Satan’s message, given with words that sound logical and are attractive, appeals to many, that is how evil

¹ Williamson, Lamar Jr. *Mark: Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Westminster John Knox. 1983. 153.

² Tyler Huckabee. “The Devil Doesn’t Need Horns to Undermine Love and Grace” *Vision-Sojourners* Feb/Mar 2024. 38. Print

works in our world. According to Tyler Huckabee in his article from this month's Sojourner's magazine, "We find Satan not in occult symbols or fiery pits, but in the mundane, everyday actions of people doing what they think is right and sensible."²

There will always be temptations that take our minds away from things divine – does that make us evil, satanic? Like the "Son of Man", humans face temptations and are incessantly assaulted by the evil that seeks to infect, corrupt, and destroy humankind. Think about the things that would have Jesus saying "Get behind me . . ." They are the times when we do not show compassion, when we take revenge on others, when we put profits over people, when we gossip about others, when we put ourselves above anyone else. Even when we believe we are doing something benign and harmless, our actions or words cause pain or hurt to another. These are the times when we are challenged to set our minds on things divine – that is how we defeat the tempter, Satan.

That I guess is what Jesus wants all of the disciples to figure out when he turns to them to continue the discourse – set your mind on divine things not on human things. He says to them and to the crowds, "If you want to become my followers deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me." I get the deny self part – we have learned from Jesus' teachings that we cannot serve two masters – you cannot serve yourself and serve God / Jesus, it does not work that way. Serving God requires faithful obedience, a setting aside of old things and beginning something new. We read from Genesis this morning about the covenant God makes with Abram and Sarai. Initially this promise from God required only Abram's faithfulness, nothing else. However, notice that God changed their names to show new lives and a new direction for them both. Abram, Sarai, and the disciples gave up their old selves to follow Jesus. Commitment to Jesus will change your life.

When Jesus tells them that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" he further illustrates the fact that to follow him you have to give up things of this world and set your minds on things divine. Jesus' entire mission was for the sake of the gospel, and that is what how he encourages his disciples to live – and us in Jesus' church for that matter. Jesus asks this question, "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" What indeed is the price for our lives? What is salvation worth? That may be the ultimate question.

One truth is that a person can never possess his own life – something or someone will always be ready to change that, and we are ultimately owned by the creator, God. Given that fact, no one could possibly raise the price that would buy one's life as a secure possession. I wonder if that is the whole point of Jesus

sacrifice – he paid the price for us and it was a very high price indeed – his life in exchange for ours, because of that sacrifice we are free from Satan’s grasp. That is God’s promise and Jesus’ truth. So, maybe carrying our cross means trusting in God’s promises and Jesus’ truths even when we don’t see their fulfillment and we cannot even grasp that possibility. Nothing is impossible for God.

Satan’s power is not in controlling humankind but in distracting us from the truth of God’s word. Satan causes doubt, Satan would have us distracted by the attractiveness of things of this world. Satan’s distractions make it hard to hear Jesus’ truths. The shininess of Satan’s distractions blinds us to God’s promises. But – are the things of this world more attractive than the promise of eternity? “What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

I wonder if thinking about what our salvation is worth not only includes the price Jesus paid for us but also the cost of our response. What is your salvation worth? Is it worth denying self to accept Jesus’ redemption? Is your salvation worth letting go of the things that cause temptation and distraction? Christianity is all about living for Jesus and living for others, as Christians we commit to put others first and that is not an easy thing. Even for Christians, some of the things Jesus tells us are hard to hear. “Take up your cross and follow me.”

Lent is a time to take up your cross and follow Jesus to his. It is a time when we self-reflect and for some of us self-denial is part of that process. Taking up one’s cross refers not to gladly accepting the burdens the world imposes but voluntarily taking on the painful burdens and redemptive kingdom work of caring for others by putting others first. Particularly in our culture where individualism is highly prized, taking up the cross of caring for others, putting others first would be a heavy cross to carry. Jesus warns “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him. . .” Maybe that’s what it means to carry one’s cross – put others first even when it is hard to do, even when some might try to shame you for it.

Taking up one’s cross is illustrated by the woman who devotes her life to raising the children of others when they need a home, the man whose faithful devotion to a mentally ill or physically disabled wife is quiet and steady, the young person whose civil disobedience for conscience’s sake leads to prison or exile – these are the ones who interpret this text with their lives – taking up their cross. But the warning is not only for individuals, it is for the church as well. It is a warning to the church floating along in comfortable religiousness – take up a cross and follow Jesus on his hard way. “To any who busy themselves making people want to “get saved,” the text offers a stern warning about preoccupation with saving one’s life.”³

³ Williamson IBID 157

Jesus calls us to be active in denying self for the sake of the gospel. This scripture reminds us that we are all participants in the work of cleansing the world from all forms of pollutants and evil structures. Take up our cross and follow Jesus, continuing his work of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and freeing those imprisoned by evil and oppression. Continuing as this church has through donations to Week of Compassion – an organization that this year marks 80 years of a single mission: working with partners to alleviate suffering throughout the world, with a vision of a world where God’s people transform suffering into hope. This work means we let go of our old selves, the self the world has owned, and we let God be our guide, our master, our savior.

What does it mean to be saved? It means that we are no longer subject to the tempter’s snare. It means that there is a new life waiting for us when we let go of the old. It means there is eternity waiting for us. It may mean different things for different people but what salvation boils down to is a freedom from the things of this world that distract us from God’s glory. I’ve had people ask me, “Saved? Saved from what? What do I need to be saved from.” My reply is often misunderstood but nevertheless true – “You need to be saved from self.” We all need salvation to make our worldly burdens easier to bear, to make the things of this world fade and dim.

Through our salvation we make a commitment to follow Jesus – for me, I will continue my efforts to carry my cross and follow Jesus, because with Jesus, that cross is no burden at all.