

Mark 8:31-38
What Will You Take Up?
WRCOB 2.11.24

I heard someone once say

After they complained about some problems they had

“Well, I guess it’s my cross to bear.”

You’ve heard it!

Maybe, you’ve even said it!

But I want to be very clear about something.

Even though the Merriam-Wester dictionary

Defines the expression, “cross to bear” as

A problem that causes trouble or worry for someone over a long period of time

This is not what Jesus is talking about!

This is not the cross Jesus asks us to bear.

Our problems in life bear no resemblance

To the cross of shame Jesus carried.

Warren Wiersbe writes

To take up a cross does not mean to carry burdens or have problems.

I once met a lady who told me her asthma was the cross she had to bear!

To take up the cross means to identify with Christ in His rejection, shame, suffering, and death.

What Jesus is calling us to

When he says deny self, take up the cross and follow me

Is not to go around with a “woe is me” attitude

Complaining it’s a cross we have to bear.

Rather, Jesus calls us to give ourselves completely

Doing everything for the sake of Jesus

Even if it means suffering for it.

~~

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent

Historically, the Brethren didn’t follow the Christian calendar.

The Christian Calendar was a bit too “High-Church” for them.

We celebrated Christmas and Easter.

But I cant remember Advent or Lent growing up.

Instead, Brethren considered everyday a day to celebrate

The life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Recently, though Brethren have begun to include

Parts of the Christian calendar into

The life cycle of the church.

The Season of Lent is one of them.

The Lenten Season is forty days minus Sundays
Leading up to Easter.

The length correlates to Israel's forty years in the wilderness
And Jesus' forty days of temptation.

Its purpose is to prepare believers for what follows
The rejection, the suffering, and the sorrow
Jesus endured on Good Friday.

Participants of Lent prepare for it in many ways
By prayer, repentance, fasting, and self-denial.

Self-denial, however, seems to be the choice of disciplines.

People like to try and give things up for Lent

Sweets

Second helpings

Dessert

Caffeine

Chocolate

Potato chips

Double lattes!

All this is great stuff.

But with all that

The Season of Lent begins to sound

More like a class on self-improvement.

Instead of what it really is . . . a spiritual discipline!

~~

Right before our Scripture Lesson

As they were traveling through Caesarea Philippi
Jesus asks the disciples a question.

Who do people say that I am?

Well, they said, some say John the Baptist

Others say Elijah

Still others say one of the prophets.

All rather confusing from a contemporary perspective.

And so, let's ask the same question.

Who do people say Jesus is today?

Well, some people say Jesus is a bleeding-heart liberal

Others say, he is a Christian nationalist

Still others say he is a radical revolutionary

And still others a great moral teacher

~~

But what about you?

Jesus asks his followers

Who do you say that I am?

Peter answers

"You, Jesus, are the Christ!"

And then after all that, Jesus warns them to keep quiet.

~~

So far, they've had it relatively easy.

They've followed Jesus around from place to place.

They've witnessed some pretty cool stuff.

Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God
In sermons and parables.

Jesus exorcizing demons
Healing lepers, curing the blind.

They heard him criticize the legalistic attitude
Of the religious folks.

And they've seen the broken in spirit
The down-hearted, the despairing
Find hope and promise through Jesus..

So far, things have gone pretty-good.

It's actually been kind of fun being a follower of Jesus.

Except maybe for the accommodations!

Certainly not the five-star hotels they hoped for
But pretty-good all the same.

Up to now that is.

~~

Today's Scripture Lesson is the first of three times
Jesus predicts his death in Mark's Gospel.

Things are going to get ugly real soon.

What he faces will take all the self-discipline
All the self-denial
And all the courage Jesus can gather.

But he faces it in faith that his death would not be in vain.

And looking back, we know that it wasn't.

For without the Crucifixion there can be no Resurrection.

~~

Jesus told Peter

 He told his disciples

 He told the crowds that day

 And he tells us today

That self-denial is part-and-parcel of Christian discipleship.

That to take up our crosses

 Is to set our minds on the things of God

 Even if it means suffering for it.

So how do we do it?

How do we deny self

 How do we take up our crosses?

Christian discipleship = self-denial and cross bearing

What it means to me

 Is that God's will must always come before our will.

If we follow Jesus, truly follow him

 Not just believe in him

 But follow him

Our entire life belongs to Him.

We are willing to give up anything and everything
If that is what is asked of us.

It is not to deny our true self
The new creation found in Christ.

But it is to put Christ first
Empty ourselves of selfish desires
And be filled with the Holy Spirit

Through prayer, fasting, and the reading of scripture

~~

So, for those who practice self-denial in Lent
The question is
What will we give up for Lent?

Maybe we should include another question
“What will we take up for Lent?”

For Jesus said, ³⁴ **“If any wish to come after me, let them DENY THEMSELVES and TAKE UP THEIR CROSS and follow me.**

The important thing is not only what we’ll give up
But what we’ll take up for Lent.

Many will give up something
But what will we take up in its place?

Giving up chocolate, potato chips, double lattes
For Lent is all well and good.

But maybe that’s just half of it.

What can we take up in its place?

Let's consider how to redirect

Our time and resources in a spiritually enriching way.

~~

If you GIVE up your favorite Netflix series for Lent, good!

It probably isn't all that worthwhile.

In its place, TAKE UP your coat

Grab your keys and get in the car

And go visit someone who's lonely.

If you will GIVE up sweets, great!

Now, TAKE UP a piece of paper

Figure how much money you'll save

And write a check to the local Food Bank.

Ask yourself what you can GIVE UP

To TAKE UP the cause of Christ.

I've told this story before

Or you might have heard it elsewhere

But it's a story worth repeating.

Fellow Brethren Dan West was invited

To eat at a minster's home.

The pastor's wife fixed a scrumptious meal.

When she brought out a beautiful cake for dessert

Dan West said, "I'm sorry, I can't eat this."

“I made a vow that as long as there are
Starving children in the world
I will not indulge myself in eating dessert.”

Dan West denied himself and not just for Lent.

The inspiring thing about Dan West is just this.

He not only GAVE UP dessert
He TOOK UP the cause
Of alleviating hunger in the world.

He started by encouraging Brethren farmers
To donate heifers to ship to impoverished P.R.

On July 14, 1944
They shipped seventeen heifers to Castaner.

And then following WW2
Through the Brethren Service Center

He facilitated shipping loads of animals to post-war Europe.

Those Brethren who helped handle the livestock
While on the high seas
Were called sea-going cowboys.

My father was one of them.

Heifer International
Continues to carry out the vision of Dan West.

~~

Three points Jesus clearly addresses in this passage

1. *Deny one's self*
2. *Take up the cross*
3. *And follow Jesus.*

This is the true Spirit of Lent

The ultimate Lenten resolution

Spiritual disciplines that will deepen our faith.

C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, writes

Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good.

So, the next time you hear someone say
Or you're tempted to say it yourself

When you're stuck in traffic
Or contending with a disobedient child
Or dealing with a chronic illness

"Oh well, this is my cross to bear."

Let's remember

This is not the cross Jesus is asking you to take up.

Christ will walk with us through these hardships
But they are not the crosses of Christ.

Taking up our cross

Is to bear the cross of obedience to Jesus
Into a fuller and more purpose-filled life

Even if it entails the possibility
Of suffering for his sake.

What greater cause can there be
Than to serve our Lord fully and faithfully?