

The Bridge of the Cross

Mark 8:31-38

Rev. Nick Hatch

Will you pray with me?

Faithful God, give us strength to rejoice in the love of Christ which bridges both creation and time. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, Oh our rock and redeemer. Amen.

After my grandfather passed, we cleaned out his home. In a dim corner of his basement was his workbench. For a while he enjoyed woodworking projects and interspersed among chisels neatly hung in a row were crosses, he had carved. We each picked out a cross and here is the one I chose that sits in my office today.

Growing up there was always a chair for me in my grandpa's living room. I would show up whenever I wanted and he and he would welcome me in and we would talk for hours. The chair in the living room was directly over the workbench in the basement. And the memories and lives that unfolded overhead, while this cross rested in the shadows beneath, have caused me to reflect deeply this season of Lent.

Consider these words from Martin Luther:

Behold, this is the way of the cross; you cannot find it, I must rather lead you like a blind person. Hence it is not you, nor any human being, nor any

creature, but rather I, myself, who will instruct you through the Spirit and word concerning the path you must stick to. Not the work you choose for yourself, not the suffering you think up for yourself, but what comes to you quite contrary to your choosing, thinking, desiring, that is where you must follow, there I am calling, there you must be a pupil, there it is high time, your teacher has come. – Martin Luther in Luther-Andachten

Luther's words encapsulate this unique moment in Mark's gospel. Up until this point Mark's narration of Jesus' ministry had been related through a series of rapid, urgent, sequences of events: Jesus healed the diseased and the disabled and hurting people, he told strange parables, fed thousands with scraps of food, provided counter-cultural narratives to religious leaders and reached out to gentiles- ethnic outcasts.

But these words, they are unique and different.

This is the first of three predications in Mark of Jesus suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Each prediction shows his disciples' inability to reconcile who Jesus claimed to be, and who the disciples thought he was. Each passage exposes the incongruity between human expectations of a savior, and Jesus's teaching of true discipleship.

I wonder, are we able to grasp the misunderstandings of the disciples? In the shadow of this cross in our sanctuary as our lives unfold, I wonder if we should reflect upon our own confusion of true discipleship?

Luther continued to comment saying these verses there is a movement away from Theologia Gloria, a “Theology of Glory”, to Theologia Crucis, a “Theology of the Cross”.

Theologia Gloria prefers successes to sufferings, glory to pain, wisdom to folly, power to vulnerability and is based upon Jesus works in his life. But Theologia Crucis, according to Luther, means comprehending the presence of God both seen, and hidden, through self-revelation in weakness and suffering. Theologia Crucis is the divine spilled out to those who grieve, God’s justice raining for those oppressed, God’s promises for social righteousness tearing down unjust structures, God’s Spirit surrounding and comforting those tormented and outcast.

So together, Theologia Glory and Theologia Crucis forge a comprehensive theology affording immeasurable depth to the human experience of the divine. And it is this text, with its call towards true discipleship and parallel introduction of bearing the cross, which serves as a bridging narrative for this expansive theology of salvation for us today.

And Jesus said:

“If any wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Grandpa told me what it was like growing up poor, Irish-Catholic on the south side of the railroad tracks. In the racist and ethnic pecking order of the time, they were rather low on the totem pole. That’s why he had a sign in his garage “parking for Irish only” because he never forgot what it was

like to be an outcast. He always liked to tell me the story of how he met my grandmother. He recalled walking up a certain flight of stairs in Central High school and grandma passed him. He said she was so delicate and beautiful and the light would catch her hair. He loved her from the moment he saw her. But she was middle-class, protestant, and quiet literally lived on the other side of the tracks and they all associated with different people. Because of these class differences, their courtship and marriage was a little difficult for her parents. But it was their love and faith that brought them together and held them together their whole lives. Their faith filled love bridged those wide rocky tracks that kept many separated.

You know almost every church has one: a cross. Most sanctuaries have the cross as their focal point, the presence of a cross universally marks that location as a place of worship. In fact, pretty much all the books of the New Testament use the cross as the central, defining symbol of the God's work in Jesus Christ. Some, like the Catholic church, have a crucifix which depicts Christ's broken body hanging upon it: their focus is upon his passion and suffering. Others, like ours, are empty: a rich theological statement that the work of the cross was the resurrection of Christ, he has been raised and the work of God's justice and celebration of God's unending love- has just begun.

Lent itself is a time where we journey to the cross through scripture and through hymn and liturgy and study. Once again, we make the painstaking and inevitable journey to the crucifixion and death of Christ on the cross. It's a hard journey, just like most of our experiences of being human: it's filled with unanswered questions, constant change, unjust realities. So, the

purpose of Lent is then to call us to join Christ in real life, a spiritual kinship including our hardships, and to receive Christ's presence in suffering. He offers forgiveness and asks that we have compassion. He endured a terrible trial, to serve others. He shows us that when we give up our comforts that buffer and insulate us, he will build an alternate community that makes visible the Good News of sacrificial love.

Jesus says:

For 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.

Friends, the church that lifts high the cross can easily neglect the narrative in which it is introduced; namely, that discipleship involves giving up our whole lives, making choices that lead to surprising and "disempowering" statures which ultimately help us to discover that in giving we have received. That the profit of the whole world cannot secure true freedom. That our heads and hearts easily gravitate towards human things and not the things of the divine.

No wonder the disciples had such a hard time seeing Jesus for who he claimed to be instead of who they wanted him to become.

C.S. Lewis once wrote:

We want in fact, not so much a father in heaven but a grandfather in heaven- a senile benevolence who, as they say, "liked to see young people

enjoying themselves” and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day “A good time was had by all...”

Well, this is partly true of the grandpa, he loved playing the trombone in jazz bands and honestly skipped school for gigs and was kind of a carefree soul in high school. Not exactly an ace student. WWII became his turning point. He volunteered and served in the Marines with fellow high school classmates, some of whom were his friends. Eventually he became a medic and they ended up fighting on the beaches of Okinawa. At that point in the story, he always made sure to mention that his job became to carry his friends' bodies to bring them back home.

When he came back, he was quiet literally someone else, carrying the depth of trauma and survivors' guilt, but full of a conviction to live his life to honor others. He did so for decades as an Assistant Dean at the University of Illinois. He maintained friendships with fellow veterans who came home alive, incidentally, some of whom were from the other side of the tracks and had no friendship with him prior the war. He and grandma grew in their involvement with the church and faith lives. His faith became a bridge and a support into a life after trauma, even though he never fully came home.

Friends, to live as Christians we must walk in the shadow of the cross. Our burdens are buttressed by thousands of years of learning and the spiritual giants, and everyday people of faith, who have walked smooth a path for us to trod. Daily we find ourselves caught between Gods love and hateful desires, the tranquility of trusting in God and the treachery of selfishness, for life is full of friend and foe, enemies and saints. Lent is our season to

ask God's help in balancing it all such that we can be present and work for a kingdom, for justice and for righteousness.

In speaking about this way of living, one theologian writes:

This is a challenge to all of us, as the church in every generation struggles not only to think but to live from God's point of view in a world where such a thing is madness. This is the point at which God's kingdom, coming 'on earth as it is in **heaven**', will challenge and overturn all normal human assumptions about power and glory, about what is really important in life and in the world. – N.T.Wright

What is power and what is glory? Where must some madness take hold for our discipleship to root and grow abundantly?

Underneath my grandfather's living room, where he finally laid down his crosses and passed into life eternal, was this small wooden cross. It lay in the shadows for decades. Shaped by his hands, spurred into creation by the Holy Spirit, silent and upright at attention. It has heard the cries of joy and laughter for whole human lives and witnessed the final breaths of those I love.

While its wood is breakable, while its dimensions are finite, while it someday will cease to even exist: the work of the cross is unstoppable, infinite, and everlasting. The symbol of the cross points us towards The One who bridges the treacherous and Holy divide of time and creation and death itself. This lent, it is the crosses we bear that span the gulf of

mortality and carry us into the joy of the resurrection when we will share stories and sing together once again.

Jesus leaves us with exigent words saying:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For 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,^a will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

What would it mean to gain the whole world, and to lose the cross?

Friends, we do not worship the cross; we worship the one who gives all meaning and strength and joy to in the struggle. We worship God whose love is symbolized through the cross. We give thanks for our great teacher, Jesus the Christ. And we place ourselves under his care, like pupils, looking for his direction in what may come contrary to our choosing, our thinking, and our desiring.

I hope that you do not see the cross the same after today. I hope that you will wonder in what ways you are called to bear your crosses. And I pray that in your bearing that the Holy Spirit speaks words of courage, creativity, and curiosity.

Amen.