

Prayer of the Day:

Almighty God, you see that we have no power to defend ourselves. Guard and keep us both outwardly and inwardly from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen!

Verse of the Day:

Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8b cf. NIV)

Sermon Text:

What is the one symbol that is more often than not going to be found in a Christian Church? I suppose there are a few answers that we might expect as we consider those different church bodies out there, each of them linked to their theology. It's why in a Lutheran Church you tend to see an emphasis on the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and in Sacraments. But there is one symbol that seems to always pop up if someone is going to try to claim that name of Christian, a follower of Christ. I counted the other day and figure that there is over fifty depending where you see them in this room alone. There are 36 on our lights alone and the biggest one hangs behind me on the reredos of the altar. Yep it's a cross.

It would seem to me, that if you had never set foot in a church and had never heard a single Bible story in your life and yet one day you walked into a series of Christian churches, let's just say you went on a tour or something one thought would strike you, Christians love their crosses. They are dear to them. And according to the words of our lesson today, I suppose we could say you wouldn't be so far off.

Of course, Christ's cross is primary. That's why we have so many of them hanging around to remind us of all He did. So our lesson began, *He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again.* Of course, such talk is not politically correct or socially acceptable, not today and not back then either. *He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."*

Ever wonder what got Jesus so riled up? What could Peter have said? I must say that our lesson doesn't tell us, however, given the track record of the disciples who struggle with visions of world domination (Acts 1:6) and Peter's own words in the upper room after Jesus broke bad news about him (Matthew 26:33), I would imagine it had something to do with wanting to throw away the cross. Oh, you can't blame him. He has His Savior's best interests in mind as he rebukes Him. But he's still wrong to have done so and Jesus tells him as much. He was trying to rewrite the plans of God, because they seemed abhorrent, to terrible to contemplate.

Of course, that's exactly why the cross of Christ must be primary. You see Peter isn't the only one who speaks this to Jesus. Often we want Christianity to be about power, worldly success, and the total domination of our beliefs. But Jesus didn't come to conquer dirt. He came for those He made from it.

He came for Peter, for you, and for me. He comes to save those who would chuck the cross for an easy life. He comes for those who have good motives but turn the Kingdom of God into a social program to conquer the world and not the soul. He comes because, well as our lesson says, as *the Son of Man, He must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again.*

Text: Mark 8:31-38

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." ³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." – NIV84

Jesus notes that Peter has hit on a common problem among those following Him. Bread King, Healer, Demon Destroyer, Dominator of Death, it brought people running and it got them dreaming. Imagine if He sat on the throne in Jerusalem imagine, what His reign and rule would look like. Jesus sits them all down and teaches them what His reign will look like in this sinful world of ours, *Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."*

Wow! That must have been a punch in the gut. Of course, it lands a solid blow on the chin of our sinful nature too. Pick up your cross! And note well what that cross is. It's not the fact that I stubbed my toe yesterday and it really hurt, or that oversleeping made me late for work which led to the rush in the hallway which resulted in that stubbed toe. It's not even the fact that such a rotten morning resulted in a terrible day because once the ball gets rolling well it never seems to stop. No, this cross is the suffering I endure for clinging to the teaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It's the suffering I endure not because of my sinfulness but because of the wickedness of the world around me which will fight the message with every ounce of the very things I sometimes wish Christ had come for.

Of course, that is just one in the long line of imperatives, commands. The first is "*deny yourself*" – John the Baptist once said, *I must become less, He must become greater*. The second is "*take up your cross*" – we've already touched on that one a bit but note that this is not an unsufferable burden for the Christian. The Apostles said they rejoiced because *they had been counted worthy to suffer for the name* (Acts 5:41). The third is "*follow me*" – as a child in the woods I trusted my father. Wherever he went I followed, not because I had to but because I knew it meant safety. He would never harm me and always had my best interests in mind and heart.

But how is this possible? Sinners that we are, we must admit that we fare no better than Peter. Self-denial, bearing crosses, and following someone else rather than the whims of our own fancy, it runs counter to us. So are we doomed to hear the final sentence of our lesson today? *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels*.

Of course not! Note that in every one of the above commands they only came about because they were focused on Jesus Christ. *What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?* The answer is that we can do nothing so Jesus came and *began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again*.

Remember, Christ's cross is primary. When we live every day of our lives focused on Him and His Word, His forgiveness and love, well, we find the strength, more than that, we find the very reason to bear our own crosses in this world. If the world should scoff and sneer at us, for following Him, if it should scorn us and persecute us for holding to the truth, God forbid, even if it should demand our very lives for following after Him, well I know there is a better life to come. And such a truth isn't just for me, it is for all who by grace and through faith believe in the power of the cross, of the power of forgiveness, of in unfathomable love of God who saves us from ourselves.

Why will a soldier or police officer place themselves in harm's way for the country and community? Is it not because he firmly believes that his country and all she stands for are worth the sacrifice? That the safety of his family and their way of life are worth protecting? Why will a Father or Mother stand in way of danger and their child? Is it not the love that beats within their chest for all those they would call family? Why will the Christian pick up the cross and follow after Jesus? Is His cross not every bit as valuable, no, even more so, than the flag of a nation or the laws which protect us? Does it not secure our families not only in this life but for eternity in heaven with Him?

Ah, dear Christians, Christianity it would seem is all about crosses, Christ's and our own. He bore His for us and for our salvation. We bear ours focused on His love, His life, His death, and resurrection. No wonder, we see so many of them. Dare we say it, they are dear to us because Christ is! Amen.