

24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

Mark 8:27-38

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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mark Twain once said:

*Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture
which they cannot understand;*

but as for me,

*I always noticed that the passages in Scripture
which trouble me most*

*are those which I **do understand**.*

In today's Gospel, after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, we hear these words:

*Then [Jesus] began to teach them
that the Son of Man must undergo **great suffering**,
and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes,
and **be killed** and after three days rise again. (8:31)*

A bit later, Jesus continues:

*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 the sake of the gospel, will save it. (8:34b,35)*

Those words weren't exactly music to Peter's ears, and they aren't exactly music to ours, either. Who wants a Savior who walks knowingly to his death? And further, who wants to deny himself and take up a cross and follow such a Savior? Who wants to lose his life?

With Mark Twain, we can say, "*It's passages like this — passages we understand — which trouble us **most!***"

I recall seeing a feature article which directly related to today's Gospel. The article included a photo of the front end of a Rolls Royce. But in place of the standard Rolls Royce hood ornament, there had been photo-shopped a cross. And the article was entitled, "*Does God want you to be rich?*" The article was all about the ongoing phenomenon of what is known as the "gospel of prosperity" or a "gospel of riches." Or what Lutherans would typically call a theology of glory, instead of a theology of the cross.

This matter gets to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Is being a Christian all about being **healthy, wealthy and wise**? Is being a Christian all about things **going well** and being "**successful**?" Is being a Christian all about being **comfortable**, and *well-to-do*, and getting your felt-needs met?

Or is being a Christian instead all about being *faithful* rather than successful in the eyes of the world? Is being a Christian all about *self-sacrifice* instead of self-promotion? Instead of being comfortable and getting your desires met, is being a Christian instead about being roused from indolence and self-centeredness, and living a life of *service* for Jesus and for your neighbor?

South Dakota, lay theologian, Kathleen Norris relates one of her experiences which is quite relevant to today's Gospel. Norris writes:

Not long ago...[after giving a presentation at a college]

a woman in the audience asked a question...

"I don't mean to be offensive," she said,

*"but I just don't understand how you can get so much **comfort** from [your] religion..."*

I understood...where that question was coming from.

*[And] I realized that what troubled me most was [the questioner's] use of the word "**comfort**," so in my reply I addressed that first.*

I said that I didn't think it was comfort I was seeking, or comfort that I'd found.

Look, I said to her...

*As far as I'm concerned, [Christianity] has **saved** my life, my husband's life, and our marriage.*

*So it's **not** comfort that I'm talking about but **salvation**.*

—*Amazing Grace*, pp. 3-4

Not comfort, but salvation.

Truly, Christ Jesus does *not* come to us with a promise of comfort, but rather with a promise of redemption and salvation: "*those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, **will save it.***" Now this is not to say that there isn't great comfort to be found in Jesus, but it's often not the kind of comfort the world is looking for.

Successful people often assume that they are infallible, and in control of their own destiny. On the cross, however, Jesus, the beloved Son of God, is revealed as fully human, which means that he is vulnerable to suffering and death. The cross is like a slap in the face, to any theology of glory, to any gospel of prosperity, or to any gospel of "success." After all, how "successful" was Jesus? The scriptures say that *all* his followers — *all of them* — deserted him in his hour of need. And how much wealth, what kind of riches did Jesus accumulate? He died penniless. He died naked. He died abandoned. He even had to be buried in a borrowed tomb.

Likewise, how "successful" were the disciples? All but one of them, died as martyrs. They were put to death — like Jesus — for being faithful to God. How "successful" was St. Paul? He too died the death of a martyr. He was beheaded in

Rome. How much wealth, what kind of riches did he accumulate?

Some gospel of prosperity. Some gospel of success.

In today's text from St. Mark, we have arrived again at the cross. It does seem, doesn't it, that we just can't get away from it — we can't escape this great ***stumbling block*** of Christianity. Indeed the cross is ***now***, what it ***always*** has been: "***a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles***" (1 Cor 1:23). Truly the cross of Jesus is a scandal to Jews, and to Buddhists, and to Hindus, and to Muslims, and to atheists, and unfortunately it is a scandal to a great many who bear the name of Jesus as well.

Lutheran theologian, Marva Dawn, addresses this matter in another way in her book, "*Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*". She writes:

At [a recent] World's Fair, the Christian pavilion's presentation utilized glitzy double-reversed photography and flashing lasers. When I tried to explain my qualms about the production to an attendant who had asked me how I liked their "show," she protested that it had saved many people.

*I asked, "Saved by what kind of Christ?"
If people are saved by a **spectacular** Christ,
will they find him in the fumbling of their own devotional life
or in the humble services of local parishes
where pastors and organists make mistakes?*

*Will a **glitzy** portrayal of Christ, nurture in new believers
his character of **willing suffering** and **sacrificial obedience**?*

*Will [a **glitzy** portrayal of Christ] create an awareness
of the idolatries of our age and lead [people] to repentance?*

*And does a flashy, hard-rock sound track
bring people to a Christ who calls us away
from the world's superficiality
to deeper reflection and meditation? —(p.50)*

The way of the cross — the way of self-emptying — is ***not*** the way we would naturally choose. But it is the way of God's love. It is the way of Jesus. And if we would be his disciples, we must follow in that way.

Some time back, I heard on the radio the account of a Nigerian archbishop who offered to trade his life for the life of a Muslim woman who had been condemned to death. This woman had been found guilty of adultery and was to be stoned to death. And so this local Christian archbishop offered to take her punishment, to give his life for hers.

Most of us aren't faced with such dramatic situations. Instead, we face

more mundane things like. Things like — an unpopular student at school who needs a friend — a stressed out colleague who needs some extra patience and a listening ear — a hungry man who needs a hot meal — or a neighbor who needs someone with just enough courage to invite them to Church, and to share the promise of forgiveness and new life that comes from Jesus.

Our good Lord Jesus asks us, “What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life?” My way is the way of the cross. Come and follow me. Come and receive *real life!*

In the name of the Father, and of the ✝ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.