

Nathan Brown
“The Journey of Transformation: Decisions”
March 8, 2009
West Side Christian Church

Mark 8:31-38

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today. We put it on church material and hand it to visitors with smiling faces. We wear crosses around our necks, tattoo them on our bodies, and embroider them on our belongings. Marion and I have a Waterford crystal cross that was given to us on our wedding and sits on our coffee table in our den. As the church, because the cross is the symbol of our faith, we tend to romanticize, sentimentalize, and even, at times, trivialize it.

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today. The way the church depicts the cross would have been offensive to a first century Mediterranean audience. Handing this symbol out with a smile, wearing it around our necks, adorning the cross in crystal, these would have been ludicrous practices for even the earliest Christians. Crucifixion was the most brutal of punishments reserved for the most heinous offenders. Even after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, there still was nothing to celebrate about the cross.

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today. Ultimately, the reason we cherish the cross, the reason we hand it out with smiling faces, the reason we decorate it with our finest metals and jewels is because the suffering we see in the cross, is not ours, but Jesus’. The cross has become for us a symbol of what we do not have to endure, because Jesus did it for us. Yet, Jesus tells his disciples today, “If you want to follow me, you need to deny yourself, and pick up your own cross.”

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today. Jesus teaches his disciples in our passage this morning, that the cross is not just about the decision that Jesus makes to die, but it’s about the decisions we make as well—the decisions to get behind Jesus, carry our own cross, and follow him; the decisions to take seriously a life of discipleship, putting God’s priorities ahead of our own; the decisions to deny our “self”; the decisions not to celebrate what the cross has done for us, but how we might take up the cross ourselves.

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today. I remember reading a story recently about a man who was shot by his 14 year-old son in a hunting accident. It was the first time he had taken his son hunting and it happened on Thanksgiving Day. Since then he has suffered a stroke because a pellet of the buckshot got in his bloodstream. He lost the use of his right arm and hand. He has a brace on his right leg and walks with a pronounced limp. His speech has also been affected and he has trouble articulating his thoughts in a full sentence.

I have heard people say of these situations, “That is a tough cross to bear,” or “What a difficult cross for his wife to bear.” While this situation is completely tragic and unfair in every way, it is not a cross. These kinds of situations are horrible, but no one would ever take on such tragedy and devastation willingly, or by choice. Taking up the cross is about decisions—it’s about being intentional with the way we live.

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today. In our country, a woman is beaten every 18 seconds, totaling about 3-4 million battered women every year. About 1 out of every 3 women that goes into a hospital emergency room is there because of injuries from domestic violence. Similarly, children are abused at an even higher rate. The sad fact is that when some of these battered women and children go to their ministers, they are still quoted this part of the Bible and advised to just accept that abuse as the cross God wants them to bear. Bearing the cross is never about abuse.¹

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today. And rightly so. I have just mentioned a number of different kinds of ways the church understands the cross. Trying to process the complexities of the cross can cause quite a bit of confusion. It certainly did for Peter. He is so confused that he rebukes Jesus, telling him that the cross is not the way for the Messiah.

Don’t we do the same? In our sentimentalizing the cross, don’t we rebuke Jesus? In our rationalizing tragedy in our lives as the cross, don’t we rebuke Jesus? In our justifying abuse as the cross, don’t we rebuke Jesus? In our attempts to avoid the cross, by placing it solely in Jesus’ hands, relieving ourselves of any responsibility of carrying it, don’t we rebuke Jesus?

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today. Our confusion about the cross is most evident in our decisions. It is our choices, our actions...our decisions that our most important to Jesus. At least, that’s what Jesus says. “If you want to follow me, you have got to pick up your cross.” You have to be intentional, discerning, purposeful—you cannot wander aimlessly along with the status quo, justifying, rationalizing, romanticizing and trivializing. You have to make thoughtful, careful decisions about what it means to follow Jesus. *You* have to pick up your cross!

So, I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today...**but not everyone is confused.** One pastor tells about a congregant who came to him and said, “I am deeply concerned about some of the practices at my workplace. I detect a clear pattern of how some people are promoted, and some are not promoted, purely on the basis of their race, the color of their skin. My boss repeatedly passes over some workers who perform well and are a credit to the company, because they were not of the same race as my boss.”

¹ Bowen, Edward. “Some Cross Words From Jesus.” Sermon Preached at Crafton United Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA.

The pastor urged him carefully to broach the subject with his boss. He ought to see if there are others in his company who share his concern. He ought to be careful how he accuses his boss of racial discrimination. He ought not to come across as “holier than thou” or self-righteous.

The congregant followed the Pastor’s advice and eventually confronted his boss. A month later, he was unceremoniously fired. He couldn't get a job for nearly a year, due to his boss' bad opinion of him. When he finally got a job, it was not as good a job as he once had.²

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today, but not everyone is confused. Churches throughout the world, including West Side Christian Church, are struggling financially to make ends meet because of the situation of our economy. There are bills that are going unpaid month to month here because giving is down.

Some, though, have given up small things in order that their giving to the church not decline. Some have decided not to go out to eat as much, some have decided to give up their DVDs and CDs, some have chosen to make even greater sacrifices, like downgrading their cable programming or their wireless plans, or even altogether getting rid of unnecessary conveniences in their lives.

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today, but not everyone is confused. I look at the sign-up sheets for homeless week; I see the many spaces that need to be filled, particularly the chaperone spaces. We cannot do this ministry without enough chaperones. Nevertheless, I do see those individuals who have signed up—those who have made the decision to step out of their comfort zone, to sacrifice a good night’s sleep, to serve our neighbors.

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today, but not everyone is confused. The doctor spared few words. “Your baby is afflicted with Down’s Syndrome. I had expected this, but things were too far along before I could say for sure.”

“Is the baby healthy?” she asked.

“That’s what I wanted to discuss with you,” the doctor said. “The baby is healthy -- except for the problem. However, it does have a slight, rather common respiratory ailment. My advice is that you let me take it off the respirator -- that might solve things. At least, it’s a possibility.”

“It’s not a possibility for us,” they said together.

“I know how you feel,” responded the doctor. “But you need to think about what you’re doing. You already have two beautiful kids. Statistics show that people who keep

² Willimon, William. *Pulpit Resource*. “March 8, 2009-Crucifers (Relating the Text).” Inver Grove Heights: Logos Productions, 2009.

these babies risk a higher incidence of marital stress and family problems. Is it fair to do this to the children you already have? Is it right to bring this suffering into your family?"

At the mention of "suffering" her face brightened, as if the doctor were finally making sense.

"Suffering?" she said quietly. "We appreciate your concern, but we're Christians. God suffered for us, and we will try to suffer for the baby, if we must."

"Pastor, I hope you can do something with them," the doctor said to him outside the door as he continued his rounds.

Two days later, the doctor and minister watched the couple leave the hospital. They walked slowly, carrying a small bundle; but it seemed a heavy burden to the doctor and minister, a weight on their shoulders.

The pastor reflected back saying, "I felt as if we could hear them dragging, clanking it down the front steps of the hospital, moving slowly but deliberately into a cold, gray March morning."

"It will be too much for them," the doctor said. "You ought to have talked them out of it. You should have helped them to understand."

The minister said, "But as they left, I noticed a curious look on their faces; they looked as if the burden were not too heavy at all, as if it were a privilege and a sign. They seemed borne up, as if on another's shoulders, being carried toward some high place the doctor and I would not be going, following a way that seemed confusing."³

I think there is confusion about the cross in the church today, but not everyone is confused. Are you?

Amen.

³ Willimon, William. "Taking Up the Cross." *The Christian Century*. March 2, 1983. Pgs. 173-174.