

"The Sticker Shock of Discipleship"

Mark 8:27-38

February 25, 2018

2nd Sunday In Lent

As many of you know, I was forced to go car shopping after my previous vehicle was in a wreck and was total out by the insurance company. I managed to scrape together about \$5,000 which I thought would buy a reasonable car. Boy, was I wrong! I had allowed nostalgia to affect my good business sense. I can remember when I was a kid that \$5,000 was an amount that only rich people would spend to buy a luxurious car. So, I thought I could buy a decent used car, even at today's prices. I was greatly surprised to find out that \$5,000 could only buy a car which had excessive mileage on it or probably wasn't safe.

I had just experienced what is called "sticker shock". Sticker shock is defined as "the feeling of surprise or shock experienced by consumers upon finding unexpectedly high prices on the price tags (stickers) of products they are considering purchasing." If you looked at the price of a car first, the sticker shock would prevent you from ever buying a new vehicle.

What is necessary to overcome sticker shock is to look at the vehicle itself first and foremost. See the finished product of your desire with all of its outstanding features. See the necessity of having transportation for both business and pleasure. When you have that vision and that desire in your mind, then you'll do everything possible -- furiously save money or fanatically give up other pleasures and expenses -- to buy and possess that vehicle.

As we continue our Lenten journey this year, we find that there is a cost to discipleship, i.e. following Jesus. Many think the cost is minimal: be baptized and confirmed; formally join a congregation and have your name put on the membership rolls; and attend religious services, more or less frequently, depending upon scheduling availability. This all sounds quite reasonable and most people would be willing to go along with it.

However, our Gospel reading for today is essentially "sticker shock" for discipleship. Jesus's says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Jesus does not force anyone to be His disciple. He wants people to follow voluntarily. One author said, "Christ does not pull His sheep by a rope." However, if we wish to be disciples of Christ, then discipleship is on His terms, not ours. Ponder, for a moment, Jesus' requirements for discipleship and how it conflicts with the general culture in modern day America.

First, He says a disciple must "deny himself." To deny one's self means to say no to yourself, your wants and your desires. To deny one's self means using your time, energy, and resources totally for Christ's purposes, not your own. However, our world emphasizes self indulgence - using your time, energy, and resources to satisfy and serve yourself alone. Advertisers sell their products by convincing us that we need a certain product, we deserve a certain service, or we have a right to enjoy ourselves. To deny ourselves pleasure or enjoyment would seem to be downright unAmerican.

Secondly, Jesus says a disciple must "take up his cross". The cross in Jesus' time was an instrument for great suffering and a painful death. The cross is a symbol

for that pain and suffering. Here, Jesus is saying that His disciple will experience suffering and pain. However, Jesus is not referring to every little ache or pain or disappointment that might enter a disciple's life. Here, Jesus is referring to any heartache, pain, suffering, or even death that is specifically a result of following Him. A disciple is to be willing to accept any pain, any suffering, and even death for following Jesus. On the other hand, our world emphasizes the avoidance of pain and suffering. We have come to believe that for any pain or suffering there must be a pill, a treatment, or therapy to get rid of it and quickly. And, if something we do causes pain or suffering, we avoid such behavior and do something else. In our world, one would never intentionally do anything to cause him/her pain and suffering. We would prefer to avoid it.

Thirdly, Jesus says that a disciple is to "follow me." A disciple does not lead or set the agenda for behavior and action. The master does. The disciple follows in a close and constant relationship with the master. Jesus' disciple will follow Him, copy His behavior and action, and maintain a close and constant relationship with Him through His Word in the Scripture and His Sacrament in the gathering of the saints. However, in our world, many people would rather be leaders than followers. People would rather decide their own behavior on the basis of what "works for them." They believe any restraint on their behavior is something to be avoided, not commanded or commended.

Since Adam and Eve turned from following God to following Satan and their own self-centered desires, people have rebelled against following God and His Son, Jesus Christ. Instead, most people in the world choose to follow themselves and their own desires. Even many who call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ are not disciples according to Jesus' definition. We'd like to claim, in our defense, that Jesus' requirements are simply too difficult -- even impossible. After all, who could give up everything, accept problems and difficulties, and follow someone that closely?

In 1997, when our family was still living in Wisconsin, the Green Bay Packers won the Super Bowl. Most of you know how rabid the fans of Green Bay are. There were stories of fans who took out home equity loans (which they couldn't really afford), in order to pay for a trip to the Super Bowl. Others spent their savings or their vacation time simply to be able to attend. There was even a story the marriage of two Packer fans which was on the rocks. The couple had decided to divorce. Then, the Packers started winning and the couple was reconciled so that they could enjoy cheering on the Packers once again together.

All this for a game. Such behavior shows that, when something is really important for us, no price is too high to pay, no sacrifice too great to be made, and no effort is spared in devoting ourselves to that thing or cause. Unfortunately, Jesus Christ does not occupy that position in many people's lives.

Instead, we choose the way of self-indulgence, rather than self denial. We devote our resources to our desires and pleasures and devote to the Lord whatever may be left. We choose the way of non-conflict rather than the cross. If standing up for the Gospel of Jesus Christ involves rejection or persecution, we may change our teaching or practice to avoid such a negative reception or we may just shut up. We

choose the way of visiting rather than following. We limit our contact with the Lord to an hour a week if that much.

These ways may be more popular, more common, and more fun than the way of discipleship that Jesus calls for, but they lead us down the wrong path. Imagine being stuck on a mountain top with two paths that lead down. A wide, beautiful, soft path leads downward, but leads to a deep crevice and destruction. A narrow, jagged, difficult path leads downward but leads to safety. Today's modern life style resembles the first path -- appealing yet leading to destruction. Jesus' call for discipleship resembles the second one -- difficult yet leading to safety. Jesus said, " For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Mt. 7:13-14)

Even if we are able to be successful in this life, enjoying the good life, indulging our desires, being free from conflict and pain, what have we accomplished? Nothing. In the end of our text, Jesus says, "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?" In other words, being successful on the wrong path gets you nothing. You lose your very soul in hell.

What then can we do? Who can walk this difficult path of discipleship which involves denying ones' self, taking up the cross, and following the will of the Master? None of us can..on our own. We are helpless because of our sinful nature which holds us back. Yet Someone was able to do it: Jesus Christ.

Jesus came into this world and denied Himself. He voluntarily restricted His power as the Son of God to come into this world and be born a human being. Philippians 2 says, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

Jesus took up His cross - literally. Having committed no crime and deserving no punishment, He nevertheless paid the ultimate price: death by crucifixion. And all of this was done in order to follow His Father's plan, not His own will. This was not a plan that made sense. The Jews were expecting a mighty and victorious Savior. They could not fathom a suffering and dying Savior. Even when He explained it to His closest disciples at the beginning of our text, Peter tried to talk Him out of it. But Jesus turned to him and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." Indeed this suffering and death of His Son was God's plan to redeem the world and Jesus followed it to a tee.

Jesus did all of these things which He calls upon us to do as His disciples: denial of self, taking up the cross, and following. He did it because we were unable to do it. And He did it so that we would be able to do it. By His obedience, by His death by His death on a cross, by His following His Father's will which was validated by His Father by raising Him from the dead on Easter, Jesus Christ has blazed a trail for us to follow. And the One who calls us to follow is the One leads us through. And the One who leads is also the One who enables us to follow.

Our sin of self-indulgence prevents us from true discipleship. By His death and resurrection, He has forgiven that sin. By His Spirit given to us in baptism, He creates a whole new person -- a disciple -- to follow Him. This same Spirit is with us all of our lives to help us follow Jesus Christ and to keep us on the path that leads to life.

This doesn't mean that it is now easy to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. If we deny ourselves, we will not enjoy all the good things of this life. If we take up the cross, we will suffer pain, rejection by some people, and even the possibility of death. If we follow Him, it may be lonely and difficult.

But think of the benefits. Any of you who are athletes know that pain and suffering are not always bad. The phrase "no pain - no gain" reminds us that pain in athletics can strengthen the athlete to do better. It is the same in our spiritual lives. Our epistle lesson for today reminds us of that. Paul says, "but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us." When you experience those painful things, they can fill you with joy because you know you are on the right track. That track leads to eternal life with our God, free from any and all pain and suffering. That gives you hope.

And imagine what God can do through those people who call themselves disciples in this place if you are disciples according to Jesus' word. There would never be an attendance problem - the church would be full every week. There would never be a money problem, except for how to spend all the excess's money coming in. There would never be the problem of finding people to serve as officers and committee members, except to find more places for all the people to serve. There would never be a problem in carrying out the ministry God has given us here, except for how to expand the ministry. For, as Jesus came to serve and not be served, so will His disciples serve through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As you continue your Lenten pilgrimage of this year, consider how you are doing as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Are you denying yourself or indulging yourself? Are you taking up your cross or avoiding it? Are you following Him or following yourself? Then remember what Christ has done for you. He has blazed a trail for you by His self-denial, His taking up of the cross, and His following the will of His Father. He has put you on that path by virtue of Holy Baptism. He daily forgives your shortcomings as disciples and daily restores you to the path of discipleship. And His Word promises, "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Jesus once said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." You know the truth. Now you are free to be His disciples...free to follow Him His way. Amen.