



February 25th, 2024 • Second Sunday in Lent • Claremont School of Theology Day • In-Person and Online Worship

“The Cross is Our Compass”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 8:31-38

Then he 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “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, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

We continue through the season of Lent with our theme: Deeper Roots, Wide-Spreading Branches. Today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel which Keri just read for us brings an interesting perspective. Jesus is teaching his disciples, teaching them some really hard things about how his life will unfold, his life and his death. Peter is so upset by all this that he basically tells Jesus to stop, for this can’t possibly be true. Peter doesn’t want it to be true. He doesn’t want to hear it. He wants to live in his own version of how the story should be. Don’t tempt me, Peter, Jesus seems to say. We must keep our eyes on the big picture, God’s purpose, divine things, not on the narrow confines of our limited human minds.

Which brings us straightaway to the cross. The symbol of both death and life. The words we hear from Mark’s Gospel go to the heart of our vocation and calling. To that crowd made up of his disciples and others, Jesus said: “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, will save it.”

Whew. Now, admittedly, Jesus wasn’t into marketing. But he’s not helping us grow the church, here, is he? It’s hard enough just to invite someone to come to church with us, isn’t it? Of course, there are many things that are fairly easy to pitch. We can talk about the beautiful music, the stained-glass windows, the peacefulness of the sanctuary. Or the wonderful programs for children and families. We can talk about the small group studies and fellowship groups, or even just the sheer guilty pleasure of a yummy donut once a week.

I think there’s a way to take it deeper, when people are ready, that does have to do with the cross. All kinds of studies and surveys show that people are hungry for meaning and purpose in their lives. They’re eager for something to live FOR and to know that their lives can make a difference. And you see, really, taking up our cross is another way of saying that we want to live according to the values of Jesus. That we want to be part of building the Kingdom of God in this world even now, where everyone is valued and respected, where peace is possible, where the earth itself is cherished. That we want to be part of a community that reaches out to the hungry and the unsheltered and gives them food and a roof over their heads. That we long to be part of community where compassion and kindness and even just plain old-fashioned civility guide our words and our deeds.

There’s a saying that sums this up, often attributed to Gandhi though Gandhi didn’t quite say it this way, but it goes: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Be the change you wish to see in the world. Be it. Be it now. Be it in the words you speak, the choices you make, the priorities you set. Be it in the relationships you build, the values you hold, the sacrifices you make.

Taking up our cross means taking on this new identity and letting it become our compass, bringing the spirit of life wherever we can to a world hungry for our presence, our witness, and our loving presence.

There are a few times in the life of the church when we are marked with the sign of the cross. One is at our baptism, when we are marked with the sign of the cross with water on our forehead. Another, which we recently experienced, is on Ash Wednesday, when we are marked with the sign of the cross with ashes on our forehead. It's always interesting to me to see how many people come for that service whom we may only see once a year, somehow acknowledging that hunger deep within for connection to life and healing far bigger than their own.

And another is when we commission our adult and youth service teams. I invite them to hold out their hands, the hands that will build homes and roofs and ramps and mark the sign of the cross with oil on those hands, consecrating them to the service they will share with strangers who become friends.

In these ways, we take up our cross as the mark of one living already in the freedom and promise of the Kingdom of God. Our spiritual work in Lent is to live into the full meaning and power of what it means to live as those signed with the cross. This is our calling and our vocation. And how the world and Christ desperately need us to be strong and faithful!

Bill Wylie Kellermann has written: "To keep Lent is to discover and remember who in heaven's name we are, as person and community. We pray against all confusers and confusions for our true identity and vocation. We know that means standing before the cross and making some choices. The grace of the season is that Jesus [makes] the choice with us. He's been over the turf and is our brother exactly on that score, with us in the struggle of our hearts. Let the further grace be that we make our choice as disciples, in the mind and heart of Christ."

Martin Luther began each day by making the sign of the cross on his forehead and saying: "I am baptized." This is the cross we carry. May it increasingly define who we are. May it be our life's true compass, that God might fill us with truth and clothe us with holy living and give us strength for the building of the new Realm.

"We are wayfarers, following roads to the ends of the earth, pilgrims on our way to the end of the age. We travel with authority, fearful of none; we are sent, opponents of evil, heralds of hope. We'll travel with humility, no task is too small; we are servants, the cross is our compass, love is our sign."

May our roots grow deep and our branches ever-wider as we seek to be the change we wish to see in the world.

Thanks be to God. AMEN