

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 28, 2021 (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year B)  
Mark 8:31-38

You might remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the United States from Russia he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk – you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice – you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, "What a country!"

Smirnoff was joking, of course, but we do make those kinds of assumptions about the Christian life — that people change INSTANTLY when they believe. Some traditions call it repentance and renewal. Some call it sanctification. Whatever you call it, most people expect some quick FIX to sin. According to this way of thinking, when someone believes in Christ, there is an immediate, substantive, in-depth, miraculous change in habits, attitudes, and character. We go to church as if we are going to the grocery store: Powdered Christian. Just add water and mix it up, and zip, zip, DISCIPLES are made.

Unfortunately, there's NO such powder, and disciples of Jesus Christ are NOT INSTANTLY born. They're RAISED SLOWLY through trials, sufferings, and temptations.

Peter took Jesus aside and REBUKED him. WHY? That's a STRONG word. REBUKED him, REBUKED JESUS. Why would he DO that?

Because Peter believed the kingdom of God could come ANOTHER way. Peter had a WORLDLY view of the Kingdom and Jesus is speaking about a HEAVENLY kingdom.

According to that great font of wisdom, Yogi Berra, "If you come to a fork in the road, TAKE it." Mark 8 is a kind of theological fork in the road. This chapter is the hinge of Mark's gospel. Not only is this the exact middle of Mark in terms of chapters and verses, it's also the center point THEOLOGICALLY. This is the PIVOT point, where the ministry of Jesus takes a DECISIVE turn toward the CROSS. At this fork in the road, Jesus seems to KNOW what he's doing, and ALSO where he's GOING.

But for the disciples, like Yogi Berra, they look at the fork in the road, and they want to TAKE it. They want it BOTH ways. They want to STICK with Jesus and BE his followers, but at the SAME time, insist that Jesus follow THEM down the path THEY want to take. They want ANOTHER way, an EASIER way, one that doesn't involve such COMMITMENT, such STRUGGLE.

Jesus responds, "Get BEHIND me, SATAN!" He calls him SATAN because he's trying to TEMPT Jesus from will of the Father. That's what SATAN does – tries to lead us down an EASIER road. But there's only ONE way to the Father, the way of the CROSS.

JESUS said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." But WE try to SOFTEN it. We fashion the cross into gold and wear it around our necks. We put it on bumper-stickers and in our windows. But JESUS had something ELSE in mind.

You see, Jesus MEANT this to be OFFENSIVE, to be HARD to hear. A CROSS is a place of EXECUTION. Of TORTURE. It doesn't GET any more OFFENSIVE than that.

We say things like, "Oof, I've got a bad back. Welp, it's just my cross to bear." No, "bearing our cross" ISN'T simply dealing with the problems or troubles that come our way with as much patience and determination as possible.

Nice sentiment, but JESUS has something ELSE, something DEEPER in mind than just getting THROUGH life as best as we can. This isn't JUST a pep talk.

After all, the cross that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem was NO accident; he CHOSE the way of the cross. He CHOSE to suffer for OUR sake. It wasn't an accidental event or circumstance for him to just "get through"; it was the direct result of the CHOICES he made – loving those he wasn't supposed to love, healing the ones he wasn't supposed heal, touching the ones he wasn't supposed

to touch, and forgiving the ones he wasn't supposed to forgive. Jesus CHOSE to confront the powers of sin, evil, and death, and THAT was the way of the cross. Jesus DEFINED Messiah in terms of identifying with the outcasts, the forgotten, and the oppressed, bringing them the PROMISE of God's coming kingdom.

So, being a DISCIPLE of Jesus, FOLLOWING Jesus, means taking up YOUR cross, and DOING what HE does. It means working where GOD is at work in the world, relieving suffering and injustice, rescuing the weak, bringing peace and comfort to those in need.

According to a story in Guideposts, Arthur Gordon visited a kindergarten class where the teacher frequently reminded misbehaving children to stop being a WAM. The kids straightened up as soon as their teacher pointed out they were being a WAM.

What was a WAM? Why was being a WAM so bad? The teacher explained that WAM stands for "What About Me?" She was training the children to be less self-centered. She wanted them to think of others' needs, not just their own. So, she taught them that no one liked a WAM, a self-centered person who only asked, "What About Me?"

Instead, this teacher was teaching the children to be a WAY, or as she explained it, people who ask, "What About You?"

You and I are people of the Way. We ask "What About You?" Oh, occasionally we FORGET who we really are. We get lost and become a WAM. But for the most part, we are people of the WAY, the way of the cross.

As the Lutheran hip hop singer and rapper, David Scherer, A.K.A. Agape, wrote in an online devotion this week:

God, you are calling us to freedom. Liberate us that we might be liberators.  
You are calling us to compassion. Love us that we might be lovers.  
You are calling us to generosity. Bless us that we might be blessers.  
You are calling us to grace. Forgive us that we might be forgivers.  
You are calling us to wholeness. Heal us that we might be healers.  
God, you are calling us to freedom. May we hear your call.

I'm reminded of the doctors and nurses who risked, and some who gave, their lives to save others in this pandemic. Jesus said, "Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." They may not have all been Christians, but they all UNDERSTOOD that the call to save OTHERS is GREATER than saving OURSELVES.

THEIR RESPONSE is so much greater than just SAYING "Thoughts and Prayers," without ANY intention of DOING something.

In the last few years that expression has been corrupted to mean...ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. But in the church, it still DOES mean something. The words are POWERFUL, and I've SEEN them at work.

I've seen them working for my wife and I. You may have read in the announcements that her father passed away suddenly just a month ago. Ever since, we have received many, many cards and messages from YOU, the MEMBERS of the church. We are TRULY GRATEFUL for YOUR thoughts and prayers.

The DIFFERENCE is that YOUR words are ACCOMPANIED by the willingness to HELP.

Actually, there's ANOTHER memory that is much more ACUTE for my wife and I today. Three years ago this morning, Wendy began what would be the first of two all day deep brain surgeries, to remove a tumor pressing against her brain stem. After this first one, she was on a ventilator in the ICU for a whole week. She wouldn't come HOME for 5 ½ weeks. And she STILL needed a SECOND one.

I MENTION this today, because our church at THAT time showed us the SAME SACRIFICIAL love that YOU are. We were ASTOUNDED by their OFFERS to take our children when we were at the HOSPITAL, to bring us meal after meal after meal, to take care of our CATS, to CLEAN our HOUSE. We were DEEPLY MOVED by it.

What that church DID, and what THIS church IS DOING, is BEING the church, being DISCIPLES, following the way of the CROSS, of SACRIFICING LOVE.

We have a choice. We can LAY DOWN the cross and live our lives as if it DOESN'T MATTER, just be a WAM, "What about me?" Or we can TAKE UP our cross and be TRANSFORMED by it, and be a WAY, ("What about you?") living for something GREATER than ourselves: The Kingdom of God.

The choice is yours. But, having SEEN the difference it makes, you KNOW which way is better. Take up your cross. Amen.