

"TAKE UP YOUR CROSS"
March 29, 2009

Luke 9:18-26, 1 Peter 5:6-11
5th Sunday of Lent, TFBC

I. Years ago when Betty Crocker, the baking company, first began selling their cake mixes, they offered a product that only needed water. All you had to do was add water to the beautifully boxed up cake mix, and, PRESTO! you had a delicious cake every time.

To the surprise of everyone there, it hardly got off the ground. The public would have none of it! So the company conducted a survey seeking their mistake, and it netted a surprising answer. The people weren't buying the mix because it was too easy! They wanted to contribute something to it! As you can imagine, this very bright entrepreneurial company regrouped and changed the formula to one that required the cook to add an egg, and gave a choice of adding milk instead of water, depending of the haste of the preparation. Could you imagine the results? The cake was a sudden and huge success!

A. Unfortunately in our shake and bake generation, we often make the same mistake about presenting our Christian faith. When we try to package it, it seems we try to make **the call of Christ** just as easy as possible, because we are afraid that people won't buy it if it seems too hard. The current statistics where churches flourish and really count for something prove they won't come unless there is some demand, what costs them a sacrifice. There is a mark of authenticity if it demands heart and soul! It rings true! Jesus knew it, too!

B. Once when Jesus was praying and his disciples were with him, a seriously teachable moment arose. Jesus asked the disciples if people really grasped who he was and what he was doing. They floundered around until Peter made the claim that Jesus was in

fact "*The Messiah*," the one God had promised, the hope of all ages. Jesus reminded them that the Messiah was..... *to suffer for the sins of the world, to be misunderstood, rejected by the very ones who stood by the prophecy and preached it. He would be sacrificed in the process.*

Jesus made it unmistakably clear: this business of sins that separated God from his people was the reason for it all. These sins had to be remanded, wiped away, and the people needed a new beginning with God in his rightful place, the center of their hearts, the sovereign of creation, the joy of every person. The Messiah would fight and win a decisive battle, but it was with our own sin. God's Messiah would defeat evil and its price, death itself, right on its own turf! He came to conquer, but the battle was ugly.

They sat patiently with this reminder, not fully grasping why Jesus could seem so doomsday when they were enjoying a wildly popular crowd everywhere. There must have been some silence as they respectfully nodded in agreement to Jesus' recounting of what they all knew in the scriptures. They knew he was serious. They respected that. They felt his burden....somewhat.....as we do, somewhat. Silent respect.

Verse 23 breaks the silence... "*Then he said to them all, 'If any one of you wants to continue this following that you have begun, anyone, he or she will deny themselves, take up their own cross every day without fail, and then come with me.'*" The silence continued, I imagine. Those words had to soak in.

Jesus pressed his point. "*Clinging to this life will ultimately cost you the very life you crave. If you spend it for me, you will have it all given back to you many times. Tell Me, what good would it do any of you if you succeeded in everything, and it cost you your very soul to get it?..... If we try to soften this challenge to make*

it acceptable in order to gain a following, then I will be most disappointed, and unable to commend you when I stand before my Heavenly Father and all his angels!"

II. The Cross and our crosses! What a disturbing moment for these followers. How much it still disturbs us to hear it today! The Apostle Paul was right to call it a stumbling block! Old Dr. John Gladstone of another generation said of the cross that there are 3 primary reasons people reject it today. They either (1) find it **unconvincing**, yet most of those who reject it on these intellectual grounds confess to never having read or examined the scriptures. What can we say but, *"Take it, read it!"*
Unconvincing!

The second reason (2) people give is they find it **unnecessary**, rejecting it on a practical level. Religion doesn't bother some people, never has. Since it doesn't seem to pertain to everyday life and has little bearing on their ability to survive and thrive, they ignore it. Again, what can we say but that Christ speaks to eternal problems and is just as necessary there as today's technology and science.

When you are hounded by guilt, tormented by passions with no controls, anxious to the point that there seems to be no point, or even when we suffer needlessly, Christ brings us to the conviction that God's love is sovereign. When we stand before an open grave, facing the end of ours or the life of someone we love and are forced to say goodbye, forever... Christ is The Resurrection and the Life! What can we say but that our faith is the one thing necessary. **Unconvincing, Unnecessary.....**

And last, the third reason (3) to reject the message of the cross, is that some find it **unattractive!** Somehow on an institutional level the church can appear atrocious! It can appear so unlike Christ, so petty, divisive, so timid, or exclusive, controlling and

arrogant, or what we hear most of all, so hypocritical. Nevertheless we who form the company of the cross know that this is *not a sanctuary for Saints but a hospital for Sinners!* And Christ meets us here, and Christ speaks to those who need it most and will listen, who know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is our wrongs, our blatant sin that separates us eternally from the hope of the world.

The church has survived the excesses of ministers and members precisely because Christ himself is there, in the midst, renewing, and controlling, bringing new life out of apparent death.

III. These are the stumbling blocks to faith that we and all the world find to neglect or reject the call of Christ. The fundamental reason is **THAT CROSS!** His and ours! As Paul said, "*We preach Christ, and Him crucified, a stumbling block...*" I recently read a fresh interpretation of the cross, that **Jesus never walked away from a fight!** That doesn't mean he was a fighter, he wasn't, but he never turned away from his duty to His heavenly Father, and he equated that same duty with his duty to his fellow man. When faced with the impossible, he left heaven's throne to take on the sins of the world. In Gethsemane's Garden he went to seclusion and to his knees to be sure that this CROSS was the only way to deal with sin's captivating power and death's awful price. When his prayer was interrupted by his betrayer, he rose up, volunteered himself, saying, "*Here I am. You do not need your weapons. I have been available to you every day in the temple teaching. I will not run now. Do as you see fit.*" He rose up accepting that this was the only way. He never looked back, while all the disciples fled, denied, hid or shrugged. It was at that moment they began to hear those words again.....

"If you want to follow up on this course you have begun, you must take up your own cross" That is when they realized he

was serious. That was when they knew they were incapable of doing what Jesus would do. That was when they knew their crosses would be their own, something that Jesus said could not be softened to make them seem easy to swallow.

On the day Jesus died, he fulfilled 33 prophecies, 16 from the Psalms, 5 from Zechariah, 8 from Isaiah, 1 each from Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, and Amos. He truly died, "*...according to the scriptures.*" (1 Cor. 15:3) But Jesus said they and we would face our own crosses. I think of the Bogomil peoples of the Middle East. They were attracted to the Christian faith because of their interpretation of it as a life of harsh discipline. They lived a rugged ascetic life. When the Turks took over their land in..... they struck a deal. They would become Muslims if they could keep their strange, harsh life. It was agreed, and they switched allegiance in order to keep their customs! This cross bearing denies any custom and cannot be put into a religious formula. It is simply for each of us in real life to live out an honest response to the callings of our God in Christ.

The Cross of Jesus proved his love and obedience to God. Our cross starts out the same, to love God above all things, to offer unbending loyalty, to live and learn his truth and accept his shepherding hand in all things. The second path is to love others as Jesus did, and treat them as we want to be treated. For each of us, **our cross is** for us to keep our God at the center of our lives.

"You must deny yourselves, take up your cross daily and follow me...." It may not be his final word, but it was Jesus' definitive word about our lives. If we are to belong to the man who bore the Cross of Calvary, we will bear one, too. We will accept his call to each of us. We will fight all the urges, subtle or blatant to take any other shortcuts to happiness.

IV. Leonard Sweet tells the story of his friend Tom Lind, a salesman from Montana who decided to take a short cut home. He was riding in his older model pickup with a camper on the back on a beautiful day. In a fateful spur-of-the-moment decision he opted for the scenic route. Only a few miles up this blue highway it began to drizzle, and within a few miles up the road that turned into an Oregon light snow fall.

Tom was not afraid; he'd seen it all before. He loved his BIG PICKUP TRUCK and trusted it completely. Soon he found himself in the middle of a blizzard whiteout and forced to pull over for the rest of the day. He wasn't worried, he could stay right here in his BIG PICKUP TRUCK. Soon the road clearing crews would be along. What he didn't know was that the forest service did not service this road after the first winter's snowfall. But convinced somebody would come as soon as there was a break in the weather, Tom stayed right cozy in his truck, avoiding the risks of exposure or getting hopelessly lost in a snowdrift. By nightfall the big white truck soon became a blip in a vast landscape of snow. He was a captive.

As soon as he didn't show up for his next appointment the helicopters started the familiar search. Even when the weather cleared and sun came out glistening on the snow, he stayed in his BIG PICKUP TRUCK under the bank safe under the snow. But no one thought to venture up the little-used back track Tom had chosen.

It seems impossible to understand now, but Tom stayed with that BIG TRUCK for over 8 weeks. He kept a journal of his thoughts, hopes and fears and considered options. But still he sat in that BIG OLD TRUCK. Eventually he grew too weak to have any real options anymore. By Christmas he couldn't have walked out if he had wanted to.

At the end of January, a group of cross-country skiers inadvertently came across Tom in safe haven, his BIG PICKUP TRUCK. His journal revealed he had died sometime around January 15. His emaciated, dehydrated body was still in his truck. In trying to minimize his risks, Tom thought he was opting to stay safe. It turned out Tom was opting out of life.

Life is risky business. Like Tom we may think we have all the safety devises, security alerts, and smart enough to figure things out for ourselves, but the truth is we are fragile, fallible and fractured creatures whose lives are constantly being tempted to go it our own way. Your cross, should you decide to take it up is
**to keep God at the very core of your life,
**seek his way always (you can learn that through Christ Jesus),
**and follow his urging ever day of our life.....

**Whatever you lose along the way will come back to you
many times over!**

END 1st DRAFT (2175 words, cut 400)