

The Second Sunday in Lent, February 25, 2024

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Christ's Cross and Ours

Mark 8:27–38

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

On the way with the His disciples, Jesus first asked, **“Who do you say that I am?”** (v 29), then He began to teach them that **“the Son of Man must suffer many things”** (v 31), and finally He said, **“If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me”** (v 34).

3.

The twelve disciples had been with Jesus for at least a year, maybe longer. During that time, they'd seen a lot. They'd heard a lot. They'd been around the block with Him once or twice. Which means they're ready for the one-question mid-term oral exam He gives them. “Stand up and give answer to the question I now ask you,” Jesus says: **“Who do you say that I am?”** (v 29).

They'd already been asked about what other people say, about the various opinions and confessions floating around. It's clear that people hold Jesus in high regard—right up there with John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets. Popular opinion respects Him as a great teacher, an exceptional man, someone deeply spiritual. Sounds like today! But it's not enough to repeat what others say. Jesus wants to know what *all of you* confess: **“But who do you say I am?”** (v 29).

It's not just a question of how you *feel* about Jesus or what you *think* about Jesus. Your feelings and your reason aren't the best guides. Don't trust them. For spiritual things, we need the Holy Spirit. The right answer, the truth about Jesus, comes by revelation. God Himself gives, teaches, and reveals it. So, really, who is Jesus—for *you* and for *all*?

St. Peter raises his hand first. He answers for all twelve, for the whole Church, for every Christian then and now: Jesus, you're greater than John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. **“You're the Christ”** (v 29), the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Promised Savior. What do you believe? I believe in Jesus Christ. There's your A+ answer on the mid-term. They know *who* He is.

2.

But what does this mean? What does it mean for Jesus to be the Christ? Peter and the other eleven aced their mid-term, but class isn't over yet. There's some new material to master in the second half. They've got to learn what the Christ is going to do and what's going to happen to Him.

So Jesus **began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He said this plainly** (vv 31–32). It's like they've come to the top of a lookout and way, way in the distance the cross is visible for the first time. Now that they confess Him to be the Christ, Jesus lets them see where the Christ is headed. The picture may be a little blurry, like a smudge on a hilltop, but it's there. Good Friday lies in the future. To be the Christ of God requires suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus teaches this confidently, boldly, openly: These things *must* happen.

But Peter isn't having it. He wants nothing to do with suffering, rejection, and death. That's not the way of my Christ! Suddenly, he's no longer the student, the disciple. Now he's the teacher. He puts himself above Jesus. He counts his word more significant than the word of the Lord. He'll tell God how it should be. So **Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him** (v 32). "Now You listen to me, Jesus . . ."

But Jesus doesn't hold townhall forums. He doesn't answer to Peter or to any of the disciples, not even to the Church as a whole. He came to do the Father's will, and that means death and resurrection. Anything less is a different Christ, a false Christ. So Jesus rebukes Peter, "**Get behind Me, Satan! For you aren't setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man**" (v 33). "If you want to know what it means for Me to be the Christ, then you must know My cross. There's no other way."

It's just like St. Paul said, "**We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are being called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God**" (1 Cor 1:23–24). To our reason and our senses, the cross is completely foolish, but God's thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are higher than our ways. Where we see only a man dying on a cross, God Himself is giving His flesh for the life of the world. It's the cross or nothing!

1.

Yes, it's the cross or nothing—for Jesus *and* for those who follow Him. "**If anyone would come after Me,**" Jesus said, "don't expect immediate glory, an easy life, or worldly success. **Let** the one who comes after Me **deny himself and take up his cross**

and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (vv 34–35). You gain life by losing life.

It's not easy to understand what this means. The disciples struggle to get it. Jesus repeats it, and they still don't understand, not until it is finished and the tomb lies empty. It's such a strange way to think about life.

So, what about you? This morning you've already confessed the Creed together. You've declared that Jesus is the Christ *and* that He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried, and then on the third day He rose again. You're not ashamed of Him or what He did.

But now what? "Now **if [you] would come after Me, [you must] deny [yourself] and take up [your] cross and follow Me"** (v 34). What? Surely you can't mean *me*? I can't carry a cross—not like Jesus did. It's the same attitude Peter had: "We're with You, Jesus! We're right behind You! We'll follow You wherever You go . . . except to the cross." We don't want to hear or say, "No." We don't want crosses. We don't want death. "Yet **whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's,**" Jesus says, "**will save it"** (v 35). It's a hard teaching. No spoonful of sugar makes that easier to swallow. The kingdom of God comes through losing and death.

The world doesn't look favorably on losing. "Follow Jesus and lose your life" doesn't make it on many church signs. It's not how we invite family and friends to join us. Yet it's right there in Jesus' own words.

Do we rebuke Jesus for our crosses? Or do we take them up and embrace them? I would rather keep my life *and* save it! We want to make something of ourselves. We want Jesus to be proud of us. So we hang on to our lives. We hang on to our good works. We hang on to our accomplishments and pride and honor. We hang on to the person we want to be and are trying to become. To be a good and righteous person, someone worth the death of Jesus.

But what benefit are the things we're trying to hang on to? What, in the end, will they gain for us? If we let go of our lives, our works, our accomplishments, pride, honor, the person we're trying to become—if we let go of all that, what will we have left? Well, we'll still have what matters most: "You, Jesus, are the Christ!"

Jesus and His cross are good news—good news for those willing to hold everything else loosely. Jesus didn't die for the righteous whose lives are perfectly put together. No, **while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . God**

shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:6, 8). His cross is *for us* sinners and for our salvation. To die to yourself is to gain Him. To lose your life to Jesus is to gain His eternal life. And that, in fact, is how we began the service today. You lost your life when you confessed your sins. You called yourself pitiful, miserable, a loser. You let go of yourself and all the things you’ve been trying to hang on to. You pointed to the cross and said that it belongs to you.

And then Jesus did the most remarkable thing. He says, “That cross has already been taken. A body already hung there. I picked up the cross and now give that cross to you with everything on it—a cross with My death, the forgiveness of sins, heavenly peace, and new life. This is how it has to be. The things you gain in this life last for this life, but what I do and give last forever.”

Now we see our life not in ourselves but in Him. We pick our crosses because we know that even there we’ll find Jesus. Suffering and death are no joke, but they can’t rob us of our Savior or the life He gives. What do we have to lose?

We can lose our pride in humbling ourselves before others.

We can lose our right of revenge by forgiving others.

We can lose our stuff to provide for the needs of others.

We can lose our time in prayer and helping others.

We can lose all, for we know that, in Christ, nothing good will ever be lost.

He provides all you need.

I’m not saying it’s easy. I’m not saying that we’ll always do it well. What I’m doing is giving you the cross to use against yours sinful nature. Kill your sinful nature in repentance and Jesus’ forgiveness. Kill it by serving others, not yourself. Kill it by relying on nothing but the word, the promises, and the cross of Jesus. Learn to rely on His promise: **Whoever loses His life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it** (v 35). We can be sure of that. We can be sure of Him. We know that He is hanging on to us by the cross.

Truly, **the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”** (1 Cor 1:18). And so we thank our God first and lasts for the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for crosses to bear with the strength He provides.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

