

Mark 8:28+37  
September 12, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Jesus loves me this I know,” which we concluded worship with last Sunday, is just one of the songs I recall learning as a young child growing up. At an earlier age, the image of Jesus I had was of a man that was always smiling, forever friendly, ready to welcome little children as what children’s Bible wouldn’t be complete without a picture of Jesus arms wide-open gathered in a circle with boys and girls intently focused on him. Those images, while not entirely wrong, were a world away from the words uttered from his mouth this morning. Challenging and painful words about his impending death. A stern rebuke of one closest to him. Calling Peter “Satan” was not part of the children and youth curriculum at my childhood church. I certainly don’t imagine a smile on his face or open arms of compassion when he had this interaction with his disciples.

I recently downloaded an app on my phone in which you are given hundreds of pictures to color. The image is separated into a bunch of smaller pieces, like a puzzle, and each piece is numbered. At the bottom are a host of different colors, which also are numbered. You touch the color numbered “1” and then touch a piece numbered “1” and instantaneously the piece turns that color. The process continues until you have the picture complete. The only problem is some of those pieces are miniscule and hard to locate. Thus, until I find it, the image isn’t fully complete. Sometimes, I even select the “hint” icon to find that piece.

Jesus gives those disciples a hint of what is to come. He begins to fill in their image of who he is, and Peter doesn’t like it, because it doesn’t coincide with his image of who Jesus should be. Up to this point in Mark’s gospel, Jesus has primarily done all the things Peter and the others probably envisioned he would do. Jesus has stilled a storm, brought a young girl back to life, walked on water, driven out demons, restored the sight of a blind man, fed the multitudes, and cured a deaf man among other miraculous signs. This is indeed the one who has come to set things right, to wield God’s mighty and powerful might, and to upset and overturn the Roman government who held God’s people yet again in seeming captivity. Peter’s ears just weren’t ready to hear these words from Jesus and I suspect most of ours wouldn’t have been either.

It probably wasn’t until my adult years I felt I finally grasped who Jesus really was and what these words spoken to his first followers truly meant. Somewhat like Peter, I had an image but not the whole image. It was not yet fully complete, and I just couldn’t grasp this great love. I knew Jesus died on the cross, but at a young age your mind just doesn’t comprehend what that entails. These words of Jesus and his fulfilment of them just chapters later in Mark complete the picture of who Jesus is. Who is God one might ask? This is God. Where is God one might ask? This is where God is.

Peter, those other disciples, and even at times we might come with a theology of glory as opposed to a theology of the cross. We see a God of power who in turn sets our world right and makes no ill fortunes come our way but rewards us with a lap of luxury. A theology of the cross sees God’s power made perfect in weakness. It sees God amidst the pain of the world. It sees God not as the cause of a global

pandemic, a ferocious hurricane wiping out entire neighborhoods, displacing thousands, wildfires consuming the beauty of creation God called “good” or sending forth an earthquake in God’s wrath as some mighty enforcer out to punish God’s beloved people. A theology of the cross sees God smack dab in the middle of these horrific tragedies, at work in them, bringing good out of bad, comforting God’s people, suffering with the suffering, dying with the dying. Ultimately, a theology of the cross sees God always bringing life where none was thought to be found.

If Jesus’ talk about his impending suffering, death, and resurrection wasn’t difficult enough to absorb, then his first teaching about discipleship in Mark’s gospel must have been almost as challenging to digest. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Lose your life. Follow me.

I’m all in on the “following” Jesus part, even though, all too often I still want to steer my own ship. Following Jesus is easy, until he intrudes on my nice, neat, and beautiful coloring page I have created. He disrupts my serene image of him sitting in a grassy meadow, surrounded by a peaceful flowing stream, reading a book to a group of sweet, little children. This text he seems to come in and shred that to pieces.

Following Jesus, according to his teaching, will be far from easy. His life is far from glamorous. Before he can even crawl, his family flees their homeland to become refugees in another country. His baptism doesn’t give way to an abundant meal and a cake with the words, “Congratulations” on it but rather finds him immediately in the desert in an ongoing battle with the Satan. Rather than getting a heroes welcome to his hometown, he gets sneers, jeers, and essentially run out of town. He eats with sinners and outcasts. He touches the dead. He travels by foot in arid climates, along dusty and dangerous roads, and one can only imagine sleeps out under the stars at times with nowhere to lay his head. He is constantly tested by religious leaders who plot to take his life. He dies because of his commitment to ushering in God’s kingdom. He doesn’t seek out suffering, but rather he enters it because that’s what God’s love does. Jesus will not turn from his mission to stand with the most vulnerable. He won’t relinquish his call to restore the outcast into their rightful place in community. He will not waver in seeking the one lost sheep, welcoming the stranger, extending God’s kingdom beyond the currently set boundaries. In doing this, in remaining faithful to the Father, who sent him, his message and his life will be met with resistance, rejection and suffering, even to the point of death. The good news is the picture is not complete until God raises him to new life and assures those who believe in him the same promise.

We will fail carrying our cross, denying ourselves, but we will always be met with forgiveness. We will always find life because Jesus carries it with us. He lifts the yoke upon our back when it seems too heavy to bear. Life is relationship with Jesus. Life is abiding in his love and sharing his love. Carrying our cross doesn’t mean we go seeking out suffering for glory. It doesn’t mean we never focus on ourselves. Jesus retreated often for moments of rest and prayer. Some relationships are toxic and destructive. Carrying one’s cross doesn’t mean burdening the brunt of an abusive relationship. Nor is carrying our cross always a seemingly insurmountable task or on the scale of becoming a martyr for the sake of the gospel.

I most likely will not go to a Hawkeye football game this year, yet I’ll sit home, watch it on TV and wave with the 70,000 people in attendance at Kinnick stadium as the first quarter ends. Wave as they stare at the children and families in the hospital across the street. It is a momentary gesture that turns us from

ourselves and toward another experiencing something significant, traumatic, and most likely painful in their life. It is a small gesture that says you're not alone. It is a small gesture that says what's happening on the field is but a game. It's a small gesture but I bet if you ask anyone whoever has been part of "the wave" in person they will say just for a moment they forgot everything and found a bit of joy, hope, and life. It didn't matter if the team on the opposing sideline was dressed in cardinal and gold, had a helmet that said "I State" or a Badger or Cornhusker mascot roaming the sidelines. It didn't matter if the referees blew a few calls in the first quarter. It didn't matter the score or the fact the fan next to you spilled their drinks all over you just minutes earlier or had a button on his hat favoring a political candidate you disagreed with. No, in that moment, all that matters is the smile, support, and hope those waves might bring to those children and families behind the panes of glass high above and if anyone has ever heard some of those children and families interviewed, those waves do make a difference. They do give them hope, strength, and the assurance they are not alone. Those waves bring healing. Perhaps not a cure, but certainly healing.

Carrying our cross, when we do it in the name of Jesus, may indeed be something as small as that gesture above because it comes as a response to his love. It comes in heeding his command to "love our neighbor." It takes the eyes off us and sets them on the other. I know we fail, but I also know we succeed. So many of you daily carry your crosses in so many ways. You set aside your needs for another be it an aging parent, a spouse who is ill, a student who is scared, a patient who is suffering, a stranger on the street in need, an elderly neighbor who needs a ride, a letter to an elected official on behalf of another whose voice isn't being heard, a small monetary donation to come to the aid of those reeling from a hurricane, flood, earthquake, fire, etc. even when you are struggling to make ends meet at home, or setting aside personal wants and beliefs for the sake of another brother or sister in need. It is easy to hear this message and think too often of the times we may not get it right; but we also need to hear of the times we are guided by the Spirit and do get it right. Good work faithful servants! Thank you for all you do in the name of Jesus Christ! Thank you for carrying your crosses and spreading the love of Christ! You are loved! You are God's masterpiece! You are doing God's work! Keep it up and know you are never alone!