

SERMON for Sunday, March 12, 2006
Mark 8:31-18

Rev. Shirley R. Funk
Lake Edge Lutheran Church
Madison, Wisconsin

Losing and Gaining

"You call us to the way of the cross..." During Lent we sing it each Sunday at the beginning of the communion distribution, "Lamb of God..." And yes, Jesus the Lamb of God, calls each one of us to the way of the cross. The words fall glibly off our lips, crosses of all shapes and sizes – jeweled, plain gold and silver, painted by Salvadoran artists – hang from our necks, the pattern is repeated everywhere. Of course we are people who pay attention to the cross. Who would claim otherwise? When Jesus tells Peter that whoever of us would be a follower should take up the cross and fall in line, in step behind Jesus, not a one of us would argue. No big deal.

In northern New Mexico there exists a group of religious practitioners, a remnant of ancient Roman Catholic brothers, called the *Penitentes*. This secret society has existed for years. The men of this society believe that sin can only be expiated by suffering, and that forgiveness can be obtained by self-inflicted torture. In particular, they believe that they are to follow the sufferings of Savior on Calvary, to the foot of the cross. During Holy week, they literally take up the cross in ceremonies and processions. They gather in their *morada*, their building that is their meeting place, usually with no windows, no signs or markings except a simple cross above the single door. They make open wounds on their backs in self-flagellation, as Jesus might have endured. The most usual ceremony of Holy Week is a procession, in which *penitentes* carry a heavy cross of rough-hewn pine logs on a bare back, through dry and stony terrain, stumbling and falling, to the top of a hill representing Calvary. The greater the suffering – and wounds and exhaustion and even deaths are reported - the greater the forgiveness and earning of heavenly rewards. This is certainly a devotional and spiritual exercise, but not what Jesus would want us to do in response to his instruction to take up our cross and follow. What is the way of the cross?

The way of the cross is a chosen way. How many times have you used the phrase, or been asked the question, "What is your cross to bear?" In other words, what is the burden, or burdens, that you have to carry in this life? The cross is then a symbol for an addiction, perhaps, or a difficult relative, cancer or a chronic disease, a frustrating co-worker, a unsolvable problem or issue. "That's just my cross to bear," we sigh, as if God placed it on our shoulders on purpose to see how well we could carry it, to test us somehow. After all, we reason, if Jesus could carry a cross, we can muddle through. And this way of thinking somehow makes us think we are being a little like Jesus when we are so weighed down, we equate our suffering with acting like Jesus. Oh, not that our suffering is not real, and not heavy, but it is different than the way of the cross.

I have a wonderful picture of my son when he was three. Our neighbors at that time were retired, and the gentleman enjoyed working in the yard. In fact, his meticulous yard was an embarrassment to our more, shall we say lived-in look, with a dog and children's toys. As soon as my son saw Mr. Z open the garage door and roll out the lawnmower, out our door he would go, with his plastic toy mow-lawner, as he called it. And in great seriousness he would follow Mr. Z back and forth trimming and cutting. They moved from back to front, and as they were sweeping up the clippings

from the sidewalk, Mrs. Z would call them in for milk and cookies. The picture I have is a white-haired, kindly-faced Mr. Z walking across the grass, a little boy in a navy windbreaker following. I treasure that picture. A young child with an adoration and a desire to copy. But at that time my son was not mowing the grass, did not, fortunately, have a sharp tool at his disposal, was not grown-up.

When Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me" he did not have imitators in mind. A cross was a cross in Jesus' time, a cross which was a way of putting criminals to death. The cross of Jesus was the cross of sacrifice, the cross of service, the cross that could even mean death. Martin Luther King, Jr., understood when he said, "If a man happens to be thirty-six years old, as I happen to be, and some great truth stands before the door of his life, some great opportunity to stand up for that which is right and that which is just, and he refuses to stand up because he wants to live a little longer and he is afraid his home will get bombed, or he is afraid that he will lose his job, or he is afraid that he will get shot...he may go on and live until he's eighty, and the cessation of breathing in his life is merely the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. We die when we refuse to stand up for that which is right. We die when we refuse to take a stand for that which is true." We have an opportunity, and by God's grace we may have many opportunities to choose the way of the cross.

The way of the cross is to lose. Jesus said, "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" This was the sticking point for Peter. As Jesus revealed the kind of Messiah that he was – not the conventional ruler that would overthrow enemies or enlarge and protect the territory or establish God's domain over the earth – the disciples were shocked. What kind of talk was this? Peter, in fact, took Jesus aside, according to the gospel, and gave him a lecture on this seeming defeatism. And Jesus rebuked Peter. For Peter had unthinkingly and unknowingly accepted the rules of the world, where the leader would be honored and elevated – Jesus would be despised and rejected. Or where the leader would be crowned a king with jewels and a throne – Jesus would have thorns and a cross. Or where the prince would be hailed – Jesus would be spat upon. Peter didn't quite understand that his particular life-view of value and importance was turned upside down by Jesus.

We are not exceptionally good at losing. Particularly in our western culture, where to win and accumulate is an ideal that has been fostered and promoted, an ideal that we have taken deep into our collective and even individual psyches. We've taken to heart the promise of President Herbert Hoover for "a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage." As much as we speak of spiritual abundance as being far more important than physical or material abundance, the change comes slowly. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The deep secret of Jesus' hard words is that the way to have abundant life is not to save it but to spend it, for life cannot be shut up and saved any more than fresh spring water can be put in a mason jar and kept in a kitchen cupboard. Oh, it will remain water, and if you ever open it up you can probably still drink it, but it will have lost its essence, its life, which is to be poured out, to be moving, living water, rushing downstream to share its wealth without ever looking back. You can try to save your own life. You can try to stockpile it, being very, very careful about what you say yes to; being very, very cautious about whom you let into your life, frisking everyone at the door and letting only the most harmless people inside; and being very, very wary about going outside yourself, venturing forth only under very heavy guard and ready to retreat at the first sign of trouble. You can live that way, but do not expect to enjoy it very much, or to

accomplish very much, and do not expect to be missed when your safe, comfortable life finally comes to an end and no one notices that you are gone." To hang on for dear life, as the saying goes, hang on to our old ideas, our ingrained habits, our narrow worldview, our prejudices and stereotypes, our customs and empty ritual may be comforting, but the way of the cross is not comfortable. The way of the cross is to lose, but then to gain far more.

The way of the cross is to gain, to gain a new life, a new love. When we are willing to choose the way of the cross, to throw away our old lives, to lose the things that don't truly matter, and when we are willing to take up the cross of service and sacrifice, then we will have a more abundant life than we can even imagine. But what kind of life will it be? And how do we get there? There are never enough hours in the day to accomplish all that we have on our lists – bill-paying, taxes, cleaning the house and particularly the garage, writing notes to long-lost cousins, arranging for a birthday celebration, going to a church meeting or two or three. How can there be more time for the way of the cross? Sitting with a lonely neighbor, sipping coffee or tea and letting the stories of days unfold in quiet voices, in faded pictures. Losing and gaining. Traveling on your vacation time to another state, another neighborhood to lift a hammer and build a house, a school, a community center. Losing and gaining. Driving a young mother and her children to a school program and a parent-teacher conference, in support of education accessible to everyone. Losing and gaining. Interrupting a coffee shop conversation to say "it is not right to put others down by crude jokes and insensitive comments". Losing and gaining. Voting with the gospel and not with your checkbook for public education, for equal family rights, for clean air and water. Losing and gaining. Opening your eyes to children dying in Africa and countries being ripped apart by violent wars and crushing poverty in every city, and not being willing to let it continue. Losing and gaining.

Martin Luther King, Jr., certainly understood when he preached in Atlanta in 1968, "Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important – wonderful. If you want to be great – wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's your new definition of greatness...it means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermo-dynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant."

The part of us that is Peter makes us reluctant to be radical, doesn't it? To let go and risk losing in order to work harder and gain something we cannot hold in our hand doesn't sound promising. Christian writer C.S. Lewis said, "Every story of conversion is the story of blessed defeat."

As we look at the cross at the front of our sanctuary, when we hang a cross around our neck, when we make a sign of the cross, when we in any way use the cross as a symbol, it is more than a reminder. It is a way of service and a way of sacrifice. It is a way of dying and a way of living abundantly. It is a way of losing and gaining. It is a way of death, and a way to a more glorious life. It is the way of the cross.

Amen.