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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Second Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 1, 2015

Text: Mark 8:27–38

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

Sometimes you get the impression that Jesus and Christianity are a “safe” kind of religion. What I mean is that Jesus, His disciples, and His Church never do anything risky, dangerous, or bold. Some think Jesus was just a good, moral teacher who became a helplessness victim of 1<sup>st</sup> century politics. Others consider Christianity to be a middle class, bourgeoisie religion that gives some moral structure to one's life but it never makes any kind of ultimate demands. It certainly doesn't challenge one to change their life or the way they think and feel about things.

Today's gospel reading shatters this kind of thinking into a billion pieces. According to vs. 27, Jesus and His disciples are traveling in the region of Caesarea Philippi (vs. 27). This is the far northern regions of Israel in what we'd call the Golan Heights. To the Greeks, this area was called “Panion”, named after the wild and wooly god Pan. Caesarea Philippi was named in honor of Caesar Augustus. The citizens built a temple where he was proclaimed Lord Caesar. This area was anything but “nice, safe, and comfortable.” It was a hotbed of paganism and Roman nationalism. If Jesus wanted to play it safe, He would have stayed in the south, in Israel proper.

But this setting does provide a great opportunity for the Lord Jesus to teach some of the most important things about Himself, His mission, and His Church.

Jesus asks a simple question, “Who do people say that I am?” (vs. 27). Keep in mind they're in an area that have given Caesar Augustus semi-divine status; this is pagan territory. The disciples provide an interesting report. It sounds like something you'd hear on NPR or some other kind of news program. Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah or one of the other prophets. It's obvious that Jesus is held in high esteem by many. But there's no clear consensus. Reporting from Caesarea Philippi. Back to you in the studio.

But Jesus isn't interested in general speculation. “Who do you say that I am?” (vs. 29). Jesus will never be satisfied with us reporting things about Him. He demands a

confession of faith. And Peter makes the right confession. “You are the Christ” (vs. 29). You’re the One, Jesus and there is no other. He’s the only hope. All of humanity’s future rests upon this one Man who is the Christ. All of our hopes rest upon Jesus and Jesus alone.

But what’s most extraordinary is what Jesus says next. Verse 31, “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.” That’s Jesus’ plan of action: suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. That’s what it means for Jesus to be the Christ.

Peter made the correct confession but he didn’t really understand what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. That’s ok. He’ll get it eventually. I find great comfort in that. You and I don’t always get everything we confess to be true. There are many Biblical teachings that simply blow us away with their simplicity mixed with complexity, their breadth mixed with depth. But Jesus loves us nonetheless and He’ll bring us to a greater understanding in time.

But did you notice how firm Jesus was in His description of what will take place. Jesus said these things **MUST** happen. That’s why He came. To preach about His cross, to prepare for His cross and to die on His cross. From the moment Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, the cross indelibly marked Him as God’s Lamb who would suffer, be rejected, die, and on the third day be resurrected for the redemption of the world. Jesus’ death by crucifixion “is the fulfillment of the divine purpose, to be welcomed rather than bewailed. This death is the means to glory and the outcome will be the powerful coming of the kingdom of God” (France, p. 333). For God’s people, the cross is the promise of everything good.

The Lord Jesus was anything but a helpless victim of 1<sup>st</sup> century politics. Jesus embraced the necessity of the cross with absolute determination that it was the means of saving the world and loving His people for all eternity. The cross of Calvary stands at the center of human and divine history.

Well, Peter just can’t handle it. He takes Jesus aside to rebuke Him for thinking such hideous thoughts. Jesus put a quick stop to that. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men” (Vs. 33). Peter, your intentions are good. But they’re the work of the devil. The things of God include

taking up crosses, dying, and rising again. These are the things that occupy the heart and mind of God. And they should occupy your thoughts as well.

Knowing that the cross of Christ is the fulfillment of God's will and the greatest expression of God's love should help us understand better what comes next. Jesus calls not only the 12 disciples to Him but the entire crowd. What's the Lord is about to say is true for all His disciples. Vs. 34, "And Jesus called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'"

Jesus has just told His Church that His cross is the center and focus of all devotion, life, and discipleship. To follow Jesus means to take up the instrument of our own death and walk the same path as our Lord. Taking up the cross is walking in the self-giving love of Jesus in every thought, word and deed. Let's consider what it meant for Jesus to take up His cross so that we can understand better what it means for us.

Jesus denied Himself when He went to Calvary's cross. He denied Himself the joy of living a sinless life for He took our sins upon Himself. He denied Himself the peace and joy of living in perfect communion with His heavenly Father. For on the cross He suffered God's wrath and rejection that was destined for us. Jesus denied Himself as He took up His cross. We are called to a similar path, denying ourselves and walking with Jesus.

To deny yourself is to look to Christ crucified as your only Savior, your only hope and eternal joy. The opposite of such self-denial is the thought that there is something in us that God has to pay attention to, something that would commend us to Him, something that would make us worth saving. It means letting go of any and everything that we would hang onto in order to justify ourselves in God's sight. It means to let go of the excuses that we are tempted to use to defend our sin in God's presence; to let go of every reference that we would use to argue that God owes us something.

And that spirituality is lived in every area of life. We deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus in the various vocations into which we are called. Fathers and mothers live out the spirituality of the cross when they care for their children not in an attempt to please God or gain His favor or even for their own happiness. The only motivation is love for them and God's glory. On the job, the spirituality of the cross comes in the form of working hard so that people are served in love. Wages are earned so that family, friends, and those in need can be cared for in the name of

Christ. It never enters the minds of those carrying Jesus' cross to do these things in order to earn God's favor. They are done in love without thought of return or reward. The self is totally abandoned in thought, word and deed. That's what Jesus was doing when He carried His cross.

Lest we read our Lord's words as mere religious sentiment we must heed vs. 36–38. Here we learn that everything in this life and the life to come is at stake in confessing Jesus to be the Christ and following Him in His death and resurrection, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." The cross of Jesus is the standard that measures all of eternity.

The great mystery of the Christian faith is that true joy, peace and fulfillment comes through denying yourself and following Jesus in faith and our neighbor in love. Only then do we really find ourselves. Life comes through death. Victory comes through defeat. Joy through sorrow. You find yourself by losing yourself in Christ. Following Jesus is anything but safe and comfortable. But it's glorious.

The Lord bless and prosper you as you follow Jesus to His cross, empty tomb, and glorious return.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.