



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE COSTLY CROSS”

Scripture Lessons: Mark 8:31-38

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, March 8, 2009.

I did not choose our gospel lesson for today, this second Sunday of Lent. Rather, it choose me because it is the Lectionary passage assigned for the day and what is more, it resonates with what the Lord has been prompting me to say as we attempt to draw our Generations Campaign to a close this month. Our text from the gospel is a not-too-subtle reminder from Jesus that there is a cost to the cross, and not just for him but for those who have committed themselves to believing him and obeying him. We may not want to hear it but there is a sacrifice required of any person who would become a follower of Jesus. There are other ways of saying this. We could say there is no discipleship without discipline or that there is no crown without a cross. But Jesus said it plainly enough to his first disciples there in Galilee as he made the first of three passion predictions and so readied his disciples for what he and they would soon face.

Consider the context of these ominous words of our Lord. He has just led his disciples up north to Caesarea Philippi and it was there, far from the maddening crowds that Jesus asked his companions: “Who do people say that I am?” And then after allowing his disciples the chance to report some of the popular notions that people entertained with respect to him, he asked them the central question: “And you, who do you say that I am?”

And then it is that Peter blurts out the answer which was the truth so profound that even he did not realize the full import of what he was saying. “You are the Messiah” Peter declared. And then Jesus said to tell no one this fact.

It was good advice to keep this revelation a secret for a while because what the people had come to expect in the way of a Messiah, people including his own disciples, was a far cry from the Messiah had come to be. So Jesus begins the arduous task of helping his disciples, then and now, to comprehend the difficult path that they before any who would follow him and become one of his disciples. He was to give his life in suffering service to the world and, what is more, those committed to him were to take up this mission. So Jesus begins to explain the betrayal, the denial, the suffering, the death and finally the mysterious resurrection that awaited him when they reached the end of their journey in the holy city of Jerusalem.

But then Jesus precedes to raises the stakes for discipleship dramatically by saying that anyone who wished to be a disciple of his must take up his or her cross and follow. The “Anyone” of verse 34 makes it clear that Jesus was not speaking simply to the disciples in front of him at the time but rather to any disciple in any age.

Some interpreters through the years have tried to argue that this call to a life of sacrifice, self-denial and suffering for the cause of the kingdom was intended only for those in Mark’s original audience, for this gospel was intended for a Christian community being persecuted by Rome in the first century. I beg to differ. The willingness to sacrifice, to deny one’s self and to suffer if need be

for the sake of the gospel is a command that transcends the ages and comes down to followers of Jesus in every time and place. There is a cross for each of us and for all of us. There are sacrifices we too must make and difficult disciplines we too must embrace if we are to have any influence on the world about us.

In this season of Lent we rightly recall how costly the cross was for our Lord, but let us never forget the cost of our cross, though trivial by comparison. The cross is perhaps the universal symbol of Christianity. Nearly every Christian sanctuary has one. We make them of rough-hewn timber or polished brass or burnished mahogany. We incorporate the cross into our stain glass windows and wear it with pride about our necks. We emblazon it on our rings. We even carve it out of stone and embellish it with Celtic designs. But I fear that when we look upon the cross and reflect upon its message we remember only half of the story. We remember the cost of our own redemption at Christ's expense but we forget the cost of our own obedience.

The timeliness of this gospel lesson ought to be self-evident. In our Generations Campaign we have invited and encouraged each member of this old but still vital church to make a sacrificial commitment to our project. We are striving for 100% participation, though some of you have already indicated that you are either unwilling or unable to participate, given the economy all. I understand the unwilling part though I appreciate your perspective. Some people just cannot justify spending money on church facilities while there are so many pressing needs around us. If they will make their own personal sacrifices to those needs I applaud them. But I have to tell you that I do not buy the claim of inability. I don't think the Lord will buy that either. There is no person within the sound of my voice so destitute that he or she cannot make a sacrifice of some amount, however small it may seem to the giver. Given the circumstances, a small gift may in fact be a greater sacrifice than a larger one.

As I was preparing this sermon on Thursday, I left and went out for a quick lunch of fish and vegetables at an inexpensive local eatery. As I was eating I looked at my receipt of \$7.36 and did a little math in my head. If the poorest college student or teenager among us skipped only one comparable meal a week, it would amount to well over \$1000 over a three year period. And to be quite candid about it, such an act would not even really constitute a sacrifice for most of us overfed and under disciplined disciples.

Now I have no idea as to what might constitute a sacrificial gift to the Generations Campaign for you. I have enough to worry about my family's commitment. But I do know this. It needs to be an amount that will stretch you and that you will require both personal discipline and dependence on God if it is to be met.

If your gift to the church does not cost you something more than a little inconvenience of a little redirecting of your discretionary income, then it is not truly a sacrifice. When will Christians in the West learn that if your gift to the church does not cost you something, then it is not really worth much to you. After all, we invest in those things that matter to us, whether those things are our hobbies, our pleasures, our comforts or our conveniences. If you invest in it you will care a great deal about it. That's not my opinion. That is the teaching of our Lord who said some two thousand years ago that "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." We tend to think the opposite. Where your heart is there your money will be. But Jesus revealed the naked truth. We will love only that which we put our money and our time and energies in.

Every relationship you can think of has costs attached to it --- your relationship to God, to your spouse, to your children, to your alma mater, to your political party, etc. And whether we know

it or like it, the cost for our relationship to the living do is a cross --- two crosses really --- his and ours.

If I can be frank for one moment, I will share a very real concern I have for our church here, for the larger church throughout the world, and even for the survival of western culture and thought as we have known it. People in the West, Christians included, have become by and large a lethargic, undisciplined and apathetic lot. We have bought into the popular myth that the good life is characterized by wealth and privilege, luxury and comfort. It's hard, if not impossible, to get such people to make any meaningful sacrifice of commitment that might limit their pleasures or their possibilities. Naturally they resist any call to obedience or self-denial that might impinge upon their freedoms or comforts. These people fill the rolls and occupy the pews in our churches throughout the Western world and they are happy to sit idly by while a faithful few make the sacrifices necessary to keep the church functioning. But let me tell you this: While these people come and give and participate only when it suits them, there are other people throughout the earth called Muslims who have a commitment and discipline that shames us and who, as a result, are growing exponentially. The future, my friends, will belong to the committed, whatever their religion or their ethnicity. You can call them radical if you wish, but when the Christian gospel was first capturing the hearts and should of the Roman world and eventually all of the West, we were considered radical as well. Radical means it is deep. It goes down to the root. It is not a superficial or peripheral matter.

I remain hunted by a statistic I first heard some twenty years ago, told by Rev. Harry Wendt, the developer of the crossways Bible Study program throughout the world. He was discussing the rampant biblical illiteracy in the world today and how casual and lethargic most Christians are about an urgent gospel. He then told of a university in Egypt that has some 22,000 students as the time and long waiting list of applicants. It is a Muslim university and in order to gain admission an applicant has to recite from memory the entire Quran, which is comparable in length to our New Testament. It takes a student three days to recite it. By contrast, if I were to ask you to open the book of Hebrews many of you would not know whether to open to the Old Testament or the New Testament unless I gave you a page number. All of those disciplines that previously marked the life of Christians in former times --- participation in the life of the church, Bible study, public and private prayer, sacrificial giving, moral living have largely been ignored if not dismissed if our sophistication and ease.

Now don't misconstrue what I am saying. I know that memorizing the scriptures, and embracing these historic Christian disciplines has never saved anyone. Nevertheless, these disciplines and practices are at least signs of where commitments and our loyalties reside.

I hope that each member and each family in this congregation will in the coming days pray about the level of your commitment and your support of this bold undertaking upon which we have embarked. Next week I pray that the vast majority of our members will submit a pledge. If we give sacrificially and if most of us participate, we will not only achieve our goals but the Lord will bless and prosper our ministry together.

As I look out on this congregation, week after week, I have no knowledge of how much you give to the church or of how much you are able to give. I don't wish to know because I can look each of you in the eye and say the same thing to every person. I don't know what your income is, what your accumulated assets are, and what is more --- I don't ultimately know what is in your heart. But it really doesn't matter what I know, does it? But it profoundly matters what our Lord knows. And he alone knows if you, or if I, have taken up our crosses to follow him, whether we have given up our life for his and whether our words and our deeds reflect a commitment to him.

Friends, make no mistake about it. There is a cross for each of us who has decided to follow Jesus. And it is always a costly cross. Amen.