

“The Way of Jesus”

Mark 8:31-38

When I was serving St. John in Beatrice, NE., the county jail was across the street from the church. The sheriff – Jerry DeWitt – was a parishioner and friend. He would let me know if a parishioner or another person could use a visit from the pastor.

After a visit with a young man and parishioner who had been in and out of jail – this time for stealing cattle – his mom came to my office to hear how he was doing. She understood that this time he’d be in jail for years instead of months.

She told me the story of her two children, an older daughter and younger son. The daughter was a teacher and married with kids. Her son never married, was in and out of trouble, and had been battling alcoholism for years.

“I made some mistakes with him,” she said.

Her husband left her when the children were young. She worked and raised them with the help of extended family members. She was in tears, worried about how long her son would be in jail.

“What about your daughter?” I asked.

“She is a great kid,” the mother said. “She was easy to raise. Made good decisions. . .”

“She made good decisions,” I responded. “Two kids, same home, same circumstances. If you blame yourself for your son’s problems, do you give yourself credit for your daughter with a great life?”

“She was the good kid growing up,” she said.

I said, “Because she made good decisions. After they grow past the stage where you can physically pick them up and put them in a playpen, you really can’t make your children do much of anything. They have to decide for themselves and then face the consequences be they good or bad.”

I pulled out the church picture directory and we looked at the picture of her daughter’s family. Her mood changed. She glowed. We talked about how we dwell on what went wrong and seldom really celebrate what went right.

As parents raising children, we know there are times when we have to deny ourselves, so we can effectively respond to the needs of our children. Especially single moms. We willingly make sacrifices for our children and grandchildren. This is the Way of Jesus.

In vs. 31 of our text, Jesus is totally open in saying he will suffer, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after 3 days rise again. And he said this plainly. Peter did not want to believe him. Jesus rebuked him.

Then comes the Way of Jesus in vs. 34 . . . “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus disciples know how to do two things: “deny themselves” and “take up their cross”.

These are hard, tough, uncomfortable words to hear. We’d rather hear many other words from Jesus. For example, we have no problem with Jesus’ invitation to “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

And who doesn’t appreciate these words of comfort? “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1-3).

Do we have a problem with Jesus when we hear him say, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27)?

No, we do not flinch or react to these words of comfort and hope. Although we do have a problem when Jesus talks about denying ourselves and taking up a cross!

But not to worry. There are work-arounds. The pre-World War II comedian and movie actor W. C. Fields famously called them “loopholes.” Fields led a fairly robust and unrestrained showbiz life with a predilection for both booze and women. He was seldom if ever found within the walls of a church. But once, when his health was declining, he began to read the Bible. When a friend visited him one day, Fields was in the garden with a Bible and a martini. “Uncle Claude,” his friend demanded, “what in the world are you doing?”

“Looking for loopholes.” He was looking for a work-around, as do we sometimes when we’re confronted with denying ourselves and taking up a cross.

What if you don’t want to deny yourself and take up a cross? Fine, then pretend. Find a loophole.

For starters, **try condemning “bad” Christians** — those who are not into self-denial and cross-bearing like you. There are plenty of them to denounce, for sure. By denouncing others, we separate ourselves from them and ensure that others know we are one of the good guys. It is a modern version of Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (Luke 18:10-13).

It is easier for the self-righteous to pretend that God favors them, if they can remind God that in comparison to “thieves, rogues, adulterers,” they’re doing well. Don’t we feel good when we can honestly say that we’re not like those judgmental, hateful, Christian types who seem spiteful, uncompassionate, vengeful and unyielding. Sure, it feels good.

If we don’t want to deny ourselves and take up a cross, we can try to find a loophole by “condemning bad Christians” or by “condemning bad churches” – especially churches like Divinity full of people denying themselves and taking up a cross to serve people every day.

Last December 23, our Divinity website received this message: “Hello, I am an ex-catholic looking for a church that is non-woke and teaches what the Bible intended. Is Divinity a woke church?”

Obviously, in order to answer his question, the work “woke” needs to be defined. Based on my reading and conversations, it is a new word for “social justice” just as “critical race theory” is a new phrase for “systemic racism”.

“Social justice” has always meant following the Way of Jesus when we make ourselves aware of the poor and the oppressed and then respond to their needs.

Social justice is volunteering at and donating to the Lakeside Homeless Shelter, The Greater Cleveland Congregations, the Redeemer Crisis Center, The Ridge Brook Elementary

School, our Divinity Food Pantry and Hunger Fund, our Afghan refugees, our A.A groups, around the world through our Lutheran Hunger Appeal and Disaster Relief, and the ministries through which we deny ourselves and take up our crosses is always changing and growing.

Divinity is not asleep. We don't have our head in the sand. We know scripture. When Jesus tells us to deny ourselves and take up our crosses, that's what we do! Divinity is very awake in The Way of Jesus.

When we choose to follow Jesus, we are choosing to die. The apostle Paul understood this: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:19-20).

When we take up the cross, we've reached the destination. We're ready for self-denial or the death of self. We are ready to be emptied of selfish ambition and look solely on the welfare of others. We're ready to leave the past in the past. We're ready to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

When you do, you discover that the cross you bear is a portal to a life of resurrection. If we die with Jesus, we also live with him.

We are empowered to forgive, to love, to be kind, to turn away anger with gentleness, to look out for the interests of others — just as Jesus did. We are empowered in The Way of Jesus.

May the peace of God . . .

#799 – Come, Follow Me, the Savior Spoke