



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

Our story from Mark today is in the middle of his Gospel. It seems to mark the end of Jesus' Galilean ministry and the beginning of his journey to Jerusalem. It is a transition period where there is time for both Jesus and his disciples to reflect, learn and gather strength to move toward the cross. Interestingly, it falls between two stories of blind men. Jesus healed a blind man at Bethsaida verses 22-26 and another blind man, Bartimaeus, at Jericho chapter 10. So could this be another story of blind men, that are struggling, that are blind to what Jesus is teaching them.

This reading is also the first of three occasions in this section where Jesus predicts his suffering and death. And it is true that on all three occasions, the disciples demonstrate their lack of understanding. Jesus continues however to try to teach discipleship to these chosen 12.

So needless to say this is quite an interesting section of Scripture. There are many lessons that can be learned from this text. This morning, I would like to look at what Jesus talked to them "quite openly" about. It is a teaching that was hard for the disciples to understand. They did not dream in their wildest imagination that Jesus would undergo great suffering at the hands of the religious higher ups and then be put to death. This just did not make any sense to them. This statement by Jesus was one they found impossible to understand. Even though the good news of Jesus' resurrection would trump

the bad news of his death, the disciples could not believe what they were hearing.

Not only would this announcement change everything, but also even the place they were going would be significant. Their journey would take them from Caesarea Philippi in the north, south to Jerusalem, the center of the opposition to Jesus and the place where He would die. It was time to reflect on their ministry in the region of Galilee and a time to seriously come to terms with their faith in Jesus and begin to understand that He is walking toward his death. You might say that it is a time when they are moving away from what they know, from what they are comfortable with, to a time and place of uncertainty. It will be a change for the disciples and Jesus is calling them to go with Him, to walk with Him toward his death.

And guess who jumps in to dispute this transition. Good old impulsive Peter. The bold disciple that just confirmed in Scripture a few verses prior to our reading that Jesus is the Messiah, the true Christ. Now Peter stands before his Lord and Savior and rebukes him. Wow, if that isn't gutsy, I don't know what is. How bold of Peter to try to change Jesus' mind just because it is not the plan that Peter wants Him to follow. And we hear that Jesus will have none of it. Jesus actually calls Peter a name. "Satan"

Peter really stuck out his neck when he admitted that Jesus was the Messiah and he does it again, but this time, he gets cut off. Peter goes from star pupil to dunce in a few short verses. In a blink of an eye, Peter is called Satan and I would guess that he must be very confused. But Jesus' response is quite clear when he continues by telling Peter to get behind him. You see Peter was trying to lead Jesus in a different direction and Jesus knew what he had to do and what was going to happen. He could not let Peter take the lead. It is clear from Jesus' statement, "Get behind me, Satan!" that the disciples, Peter included, belong behind Jesus. They are to follow, not lead. From the day that Jesus selected his disciples, they were called to follow Him. Certainly, it was not the case, the other way around. Disciples follow their leader and Jesus was the leader.

As the reading continues, Jesus explains not only to the disciples but now to the crowds, that "Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Yes, discipleship involves self-denial and cross bearing. It was a fact that many that followed Jesus, did bear crosses and actually lost their lives. So Jesus again spoke very opening and straight to the matter. He was not mincing words and talking in parables as He so often

did. It should have been clear to all that discipleship meant following Jesus, coming after him and denying them selves.

I read a good analogy this week that of course was right up my alley or should I say, down the base line. You do know that the Brewers full squad came together on Tuesday last week. Spring training in full force. And the coaches were ready with open arms to have the team back in training. Most coaches will tell you that games are won not just on the playing field, but also on the practice field. For a team to be a winner on game day, there is a lot of hard work that goes into preparation. Whether it is on the practice field, in the batting cages, or in the weight room, building up for the season is a necessity. Athletes must first push themselves to get in shape and practice fundamentals. It is often times a grueling conditioning, painful but hopefully productive when the umpire says, "Play Ball". I sure do hope that the Brewers are working hard to get in shape to have a successful season this year.

And so it is in the spiritual realm as well. Spiritual discipline begets spiritual victory. Discipleship takes work. It takes a concerted effort to follow Jesus; to learn His way, to follow His teachings and to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah that Israel had long waited for.

So will you make an effort to follow Jesus? Know that it will not always be easy. Following isn't about just being nice or good or a decent person. It is following a divine plan, not a human one. That is what Jesus was telling Peter. Follow me, He was saying. Follow me and not the way of the world, not Satan's plan.

And what does it look like to deny one's self? It has to do with your will. It has to do with the controlling factor in your life. Is it your will or the will of Jesus that leads you? Jesus, of course, wants us to deny our self and follow him. We are called to put Jesus first, but the world calls us to be egocentric and sees self-denial as a fault that will not lead to fulfillment. The call to deny our selves is a call to step out of our self-obsessed lives and redirect our attention to Jesus. From there, we can take up our cross.

As we take up our cross, we remember that Jesus took up His cross for our sake. He died on that cross, a horrible death to save us from our sins. He is not asking us to do the same but rather Jesus is asking us to make a conscious choice to live and act in ways that share in the suffering of our neighbors. Deny yourself so that you can see the neighbor's cry for help and see the need of people around you and act faithfully to serve them by sharing in their

suffering.

A story I read this week was a good example. It came from Edie Buttrick. A youth group traveled to a big city to work with the homeless. Upon their arrival, the youth group was glad to hand out gifts of candy and sweets to the homeless who had gathered to greet them. But one man looked disgruntled. He approached one of the kids and said sternly, "We don't need candy. What we need are socks?"

The youth was stunned. He realized that candy and sweets were what the young people wanted. They'd been thinking more about themselves than about those whom they were called to serve.

So this youth, this kid, sat down on the curb and took off his shoes and socks and gave his socks to the man. The other youth saw this and did the same. And for the rest of the week no one in that youth group wore any socks, they gave them all away. They denied themselves and took up the cross of common need and shared suffering.

That is what Jesus is talking about when he tells the disciples and the crowds to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. We are all called to think not about ourselves, our wants, our desires, our demands, but rather to focus on Jesus. After all it is not about us. Right?

Follow Jesus and live life sockless where compassion for our neighbor rules. Loose yourself not in luxury but in acts of servant hood for the sake of Christ, for the sake of the gospel and the sake of our neighbors. **AMEN**