

Sermon 030115 The Cross
Scripture Mark 8: 31-38
Sermon Title- Heavy Lifting

We are in the second Sunday in Lent. Lent commemorates the time that Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. We consider Lent a penitential time. A time to contemplate our own sinfulness as we move toward the Cross, the remembrance of Good Friday.

People's view of the world and themselves constantly changes as history progresses. These changes are driven by many factors: where they live, their ethnic group, their economic situation, educational levels, family, friends, and the messages that they receive from entities like what we currently call 'the media,' political leaders, and the pulpit. The messages from entities like these- change with the views of the population and the views of the population changes with them. The most successful in terms of influence are the people that, as we say, 'strike a chord with the public.' These are people or groups whose messages resonate with large numbers of people. I would like to use preaching to illustrate this point.

There were two Christian religious upheavals in this country. The first was called the Great Awakening, which took place in the 1730's and 40's (it is considered to have lead to the American War of Independence) and the Second Great Awakening, which took

place from roughly 1790 through the 1840's (it is considered to have led to the American Civil War). The rest of American religious history including now, I suppose, therefore might be considered the Great Asleepening. Just a thought.

Anyway, the Great Awakening, often called the First Great Awakening had a star preacher and theologian. His name was Jonathan Edwards. In terms of popularity, he was the Billy Graham or I cringe to say, the Joel Osteen of his day. Jonathan Edwards was a Congregational minister, by the way, who left his congregation in Northampton, MA in order to travel around preaching at what is called 'revivals.' By most measures, Jonathan Edwards is one of the greatest preachers not only in American history, but Christian history. I use him as an example of how the Christian message from the pulpit has changed.

Edward's most famous sermon is entitled, "Sinners at the Hands of an Angry God." Let me quote a few lines from that sermon:

There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any moment, out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.

God has laid himself under no obligation by any promise to keep any natural man out of hell at any moment.

Satan stands ready to fall upon them and seize them as his own at the moment that God permits him.

They are already under sentence of condemnation to hell.

People flocked to revivals over and over again to hear this message and others like it. We know this as ‘hellfire and brimstone’ preaching and it has been used over the centuries to bring wayward souls into the faith. I actually experienced this style of preaching as a boy but not at a revival. At Immaculate Conception Church- downstairs- on Broad Street in East Weymouth, Father Welch preached a sermon to the Sunday School (I was in the first grade so was down front) in which he described a terrible earthquake and told us that was what it would be like when the world ends, the judgment day- so we’d better be good boys and girls because it could happen any time. I bought it. I was afraid not to. Fire and brimstone is tried and tested as an effective means of basically scaring people into the faith.

Now, you may have noticed that I don’t employ ‘hellfire and brimstone’ in my messages to you. First of all, I don’t buy it. Secondly, I don’t think you do either. Times have changed. 21st century Americans don’t see life and death in as harsh, threatening, and stark terms as the people that Jonathan Edwards preached to, or even impressionable children like Father Welsh preached to. Our lives, although still difficult, are nowhere near as hard and harsh as the lives of colonial Americans.

As we spoke of earlier, the world has changed so the messages from the pulpit have changed. These days, we tend to talk about the inspiration to be found in the Christian message, the message to goodness, and kindness- not to be practiced in order to avoid hell but because that is what Christ calls us to be. I don't know, and I won't test this with you, but I suspect that not too many of you would be here every Sunday if you were hearing messages like we heard from Jonathan Edwards in "Sinners at the Hands of an Angry God." That doesn't resonate in the 21st century like it did in the 18th century.

But, preaching begins with the Bible. And sometimes the Bible gives difficult and painful messages. Sometimes the Good News sounds like bad news...and today is one of those days. Today, and it is no coincidence that we are in the Season of Lent, we have a tough message to swallow. The message comes from Jesus himself, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8: 34) Clearly, the Savior did not say this for the convenience of 21st century preachers who like to give upbeat and inspiring messages.

The people to whom Jesus was speaking, his disciples, would suffer persecution and for some death, in order to be ministers on his behalf, and Jesus knew it. The reality is that for most Christians in this country in these times, our faith life is seldom a

‘life or death’ matter. It does not, however, mean that our discipleship is free from suffering. Our Christianity is not- and should not- be devoid of suffering if it is authentic.

In our day, there are Christians who work to bring justice and peace to suffering peoples around the world and often become victims of injustice and suffering themselves. People who devote themselves, as an act of faith, to help poor and sick people usually endure financial and physical hardship themselves. There is quiet heroism in the name of Christ every day.

Even in our relatively comfortable lives, there are strains on behalf of our faith. Children and youth feel the pinch. Coaches sometimes threaten to throw kids off of teams if they insist on attending church rather than practice or games on Sunday morning. Adults often must hold their religious identity in check in the workplace. These sacrifices, when you think of the martyrdom in the history of the church, might seem trivial, but they are not for the individuals who experience them.

But taking up the Cross for Christ is a greater calling than that. It involves the daily life of living as Jesus would have us live. It is service for others as a life style. It is caring for someone in need. It is practicing forgiveness, real forgiveness, not just brushing off a slight and saying, “Oh, forget it” and still feeling resentment. It is doing what is right when you really want to do

the selfish thing, and to do it because you know that Jesus is calling you to. It is responding to malice with goodness. It is avoiding participation in gossip and ill will. It is taking to your heart the old hymn, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” These are sometimes, often, hard to do. Sometimes the weight of the cross is heavy. But true and authentic faith is not just a declaration of faith without changing who you are.

Taking up the cross as a disciple of Christ is not an easy pursuit in life and we should never pretend that it is. When I was confirmed as a teenager in the Roman Catholic Church, the Cardinal (Richard Cardinal Cushing) slapped me and the other Confirmands in the face. The theological reason was to remind the Confirmands that Christian discipleship involves hardship, and yes, suffering. Faith isn’t just about what we get from it. It is about giving of ourselves in authentic ways.

Taking up the cross for Christ is a real life pursuit calling for real life commitment. For some of us, Fred Craddock is in that discussion with Jonathan Edwards of some of the great preachers in history. He’s still alive. Actually, he wrote the main textbook that we used in preaching class. For me, he captured the concept of discipleship that carrying the cross calls us to. In his book, *Leadership* (1984), he wrote:

We think of giving all to our Lord is like taking a \$1000 bill and laying it on the table and saying- “Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.”

But the reality for the most of us is that Christ sends us to the bank and has us cash the \$1000 bill for quarters. We go through life putting out .25 here and .50 there...

Usually, giving our life to Christ isn’t glorious. It is done in all those quiet acts of love, .25 at a time.

When you think of it like that, maybe the Cross-isn’t so heavy after all. AMEN