

Second Sunday in Lent
Sermon Text: Mark 8:31-38
Related Text: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Date Preached: March 8, 2009

Gracious God, expand our vision to see things from your perspective. Give us courage and strength to pick up a cross and follow you. Amen

The disciples received an attitude adjustment. Jesus plainly and openly tells the disciples he is going to die. He is going to sacrifice himself.

Jesus holds nothing back. He doesn't hold anything back from the disciples who are obviously less than pleased about predictions of his death. Jesus will not give into the temptation to travel a different road than the one that leads to death. Jesus will not let the selfish desires of Peter or other disciples persuade him from fulfilling God's plan.

Likewise, Jesus doesn't hold back from the crowds the total devotion that is required of anyone who wants to be his followers. "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Yet, what does this mean for 21st century Americans, who despite fears of an uncertain and perilous economy, are still among the wealthiest of nations?

What does it mean for us to take up the cross and follow Jesus from the comforts of a home and a place where we don't fear daily attacks from enemies or government agents as is the case in other places of the world?

Perhaps we might benefit from phrasing the question in a different way. What things prevent us from following Jesus?

Sure, we can point to the big hurdles. Some of us hold resentments toward the illegal aliens living in this country. Instead of seeing these individuals as our neighbor whom Jesus tells us to love, we see them as a thief who drains the limited social resources of local, state, federal governments and charitable agencies.

Some point fault toward government for taking prayer out of the schools. Others point the finger at increasing activities offered to children and teenagers.

There are also however, a slew of everyday hurdles. How many of us NEED that morning cup of coffee to get our day started? How many of us cannot go through a day without a piece of chocolate? How

many of us could go a day without touching our cell phones?

Coming back to the question, what things prevent us from following Jesus, the painful reality is that there is only one answer. It is us. It is our failure to look beyond our own needs and see the opportunities that are in front of us for following Jesus. We don't want to admit our own shortcomings so we find it easier to blame others. Jesus demand for total devotion hits us with law, which convicts us of our failings.

The point is that we cannot carry the cross when we are too busy to hold onto anything other than God. That doesn't mean we are excused from trying. Jesus does indeed want us to follow him.

Jesus wants us to lay aside our prejudices, our egos, and our insistence on the earthly rewards that can be oh so appealing.

Jesus expects us to love God and to place our faith in him, following the example of Abraham and Sarah. In spite of their old age, they believed that God would keep his promise. That is the power of faith. Abraham and Sarah were convinced that God was able to do what he had promised, as written in our reading from Romans.

Jesus also expects us to love our neighbors regardless of how similar or different they are from us. Tend to the needs of the sick. Speak up for those whose voice is muted because of fear of abuse. Devote the time to listen to the stories of the single mom trying to make ends meet for her family while working two jobs.

For all these expectations the reality is that even in with our best efforts we will fail. It is this failing that leads Jesus to take this path.

And so it is that Jesus does what we cannot. It is Jesus that lays aside distractions and temptations. It is Jesus who is will not be denied from taking this path that will lead to Jerusalem. Jesus will not hide from those who seek to arrest him, nor will he travel any direction except that of the cross.

It isn't fair. It isn't right that Jesus has to do this. It is by God's grace that Jesus suffers and dies so that in him we will have life. In him, we have purpose and meaning for the life we live today. In him, we are covered by God's grace that is all encompassing.

God's grace falls freely upon us, in spite of our unworthiness. By the grace of God, we move in this season of Lent with hope and opportunity. We move

with opportunity to bear the love of God in our words and actions. We move in hope of the new life to come. We move in faith convinced that God is able to do that which he has promised. AMEN.