

Ash Wednesday

February 10, 2016

Sermon Text: Mark 8:31-38

Crossroads. A point where two roads separate, each road leading in an entirely different direction. Each road guaranteeing its own unique results. Each road staring at you, tugging and pulling at you to take it. As Robert Frost so famously put it:

*"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both [...]*

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."*

(<http://poemhunter.com/poem/the-road-not-taken/>)

Life is filled with crossroads: what schooling to pursue (if any) or career to take or house to buy or person to marry or year to retire. Some crossroads leave virtually no lasting impact, while other decisions can alter life tremendously.

Crossroads not only exist in everyday life, but you also discover them in your Christian life. Our midweek Lenten services this year focus on "Christian Crossroads." Each Wednesday service examines the challenges and the struggles you encounter because your life involves Christ.

Some crossroads may bring you despair; others may cause sadness; still others a sense of hopelessness. Yet, standing at each crossroad is the cross of Christ itself, instilling confident strength into your life.

Today we stand at our very first crossroad; in fact, you confront the crossroad itself. What is the "Christian cross" you hear about so often? What does it mean? Why does it exist? Most importantly, what does it have to do with you?

A DECISION is MADE AT THE CROSS and you face two roads: *Whoever saves life loses everything. Whoever loses life wins everything.*

Mark 8:31-38

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

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The cross itself is on Jesus' mind. His ministry is reaching a rapid end; suffering is approaching. So, **[h]e then began to teach [his disciples] that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.** Scripture says these things must happen. The Father promises to send the Son of Man to crush the serpent's head ([Genesis 3:15](#)). The prophet Isaiah describes how the Lord's Servant will take up our pain and bear our suffering ([Isaiah 53](#)). King David writes how God the Father would forsake his only Son ([Psalm 22:1-21](#)).

The time for those words to go into action is now. City elders elected to protect life would scheme to snatch it away. Chief priests who hold the pure Word of God are the ones twisting its teachings in attempts to trap Jesus. Teachers of the law reject the Son of Man by shouting out Jesus' death sentence.

Jesus lights up the agonizing road to Calvary— and Simon Peter sees it too. **[Jesus] spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.** Peter sees another road, an easier road, a more enjoyable road. One not filled with suffering a shameful death, but one holding riches, honor, a throne! Yes, if only Jesus stops talking about dying and simply grasps the power the Jewish nation extends him, he could reign as king for the rest of his earthly days!

Do you see our crossroads— the two roads revealed? Jesus' road guarantees heart-wrenching, agonizing suffering. Peter's road promises glory, fame, riches, pleasure! According to Peter, Jesus could have it all if only he stops listening to God's Word, if only he ignores what Scripture says "must happen."

Peter's road is persuasive and alluring. Peter wanted an earthly kingdom instead of a heavenly kingdom. How difficult to love God with all our heart when we live immersed in earthly treasures! Peter wanted Jesus to listen to him instead of Peter listening to God. How challenging to say: "Let your will be done"— even when we believe our thoughts hold a better course of action. Peter wanted success defined by the world instead of success defined by God. How tempting to leave out pure Bible teachings so that we can have a large, worldly successful congregation!

If we reject Scripture which points to Jesus, then what have we gained? Or as Jesus puts it: **"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"** Yes, following Peter's road values the things of man more than the things of God. Following Peter's road might save earthly life, but loses eternal life.

If Jesus would have listened to Peter, turned his back to Calvary, and went on to become a great earthly king, he would have never paid for your sins and erased your debt before God. If Jesus would listen to Peter and reject Scripture, then you and I would lose everything forever!

See what Jesus' road brings. Yes, he is rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law. Yes, he could have easily snatched a crown of authority. He could have sat on a throne of popularity. He could have relished in the riches of a nation. Yet, he puts

all that aside. Because he hates worldly stuff? No! Because his heart beats with fiery love to keep God's Word. Because his mind finds its most priceless treasure in the eternal riches of heaven.

Scripture says that Jesus is your Savior who must remove sin's stains. So, he is stretched out on a cross to die—but do you see it? What does he accomplish on the cross? In midst of suffering you see the glorious payment for sin made. There on the cross heaven's doors are unlocked and opened. The King of creation denies himself all respect, honor, glory rightfully owed him and submits himself to death on the cross at the hands of sinful men in order to give all this to you.

Death is not the end of it. Did you catch it in Jesus' words? He must suffer and die—but after three days rise again! The cross does not conquer him. He reverses death—doing something no one else has ever done before. His lungs breathe, brain functions, heart beats, eyes open, senses work; he exits his tomb, leaving death behind in the tomb. Jesus regained life and gained everything. He reigns as King of creation in the glories of heaven—and he gives you eternal life in the glories of heaven!

These eternal treasures are all yours by faith! Peter proposes following a road to earthly joys. Yet, Jesus lights up the path that you already walk on by faith! "**If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.**" Jesus is not telling you to find a real wooden cross and start dragging it around, nor is he telling you to go out and become a martyr. He describes another cross here.

Real wooden crosses bring suffering, shame, intense pain. To be tied to a stake planted in the ground while people freely walk by you laughing and taunting you. To hang there until you get too tired to breathe and you slowly suffocate to death. It is not pleasant—and in fact, brings much pain. While you and I will probably never die on a cross, you might suffer because of your Savior who died on the cross.

You see, since Christ lives in you, you live for Christ. You deny yourself—not that you abuse your body, but that you love God above any other thing. Yes, there will be times you trust your own decisions or doubt God's ability to answer prayer or find reasons why God's Word does not meet your needs. You might feel justified in following your own decisions.

Yet, remember who you are. The Holy Spirit has brought you to faith, making you a child of God. The same Holy Spirit takes God's Word and strengthens your love for it. So you read the Word, considering God's promises as good as done. You follow God's Word, knowing that it is the voice of God.

Yes, sometimes you might feel that tug-of-war going inside of you. Sometimes it might not feel worthwhile to listen to God's Word. There might be times when you feel like you are a slave forced to mindlessly obey everything God demands. When you feel the cross press into you, look up to the cross of Christ and see the triumph in the cross. Jesus died to eliminate your sins. Guilt is erased. Purity and blamelessness put on you. Jesus has conquered life's truest enemy by the cross.

That cross has tied you to him. This does not mean that you pessimistically mope around in this life. Rather, the presence of the cross leads us to know your Savior even more. It leads you to trust him more, to pray to him more often, to cherish your earthly blessings. We do well to rededicate our lives to the Word of God and remain focused on the eternal confidence we possess now.

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You are connected to Christ. You belong to him. His Word belongs to you. Sometimes that Word will make you stand out in the world around you. Sometimes listening to his Word will frustrate your inner being because you are not listening to yourself. Yet, remember who you are and what you already have. You belong to God Almighty. Heaven is your home. Christ remains your companion.

See **A DECISION MADE AT THE CROSS** and the two roads you face: *Whoever saves life loses everything. Whoever loses life wins everything.*