

March 9 – Power in the Cross
Matthew 16:24-26

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. As we begin our journey towards Easter we will again be looking at the book by James Moore, “When the World Takes the Wind Out of Your Sails”. Many of you will be discussing these chapters in small groups during Lent. The theme behind Moore’s book is that all of us will experience difficult times in our life journey. You know what I mean. We are moving forward with our plans when “life” happens and we are left feeling lost and adrift. Throughout the book he talks about the resources our faith gives to us to help us deal with such moments. Today we will be talking about the power in the message of the cross. We will be especially focusing on verse 26, “If you would come after me, first deny yourself, then take up your cross and follow me.”

In this chapter, Moore talks about what it means to take up the cross of Christ-like values of love and commitment. I am not going to spend time on what he says as many of you will be focusing on it in your book studies. Today I want us to look at what Jesus was trying to say and to whom, and then why I think this image of the cross really helps us when “The World Takes the Wind Out of Your Sails.”

In Matthew these words are addressed to his disciples. In Mark this same saying comes after Jesus had one of his verbal sparring matches with Peter. He had mentioned, for the first time, that he will be rejected and put to death. Peter’s response was to take him aside and rebuke him. To which Jesus says, “Get away from me Satan, your thoughts don’t come from God but from man.” In Mark it then says Jesus called the crowd to join his disciples before this saying about taking up one’s cross. But in Matthew it is only for the disciples, those who have agreed to follow Jesus but, as we learned, are still thinking according to human standards rather than the divine revelation. I think Matthew instead of Mark has it right. I don’t see these words as an invitation to discipleship but a reflection on the meaning of discipleship for those who have already responded to the call of Christ.

After all, would you have chosen to be a Christian if I or someone had said, “I want you to accept these truths and by the way, if you do you will face ridicule and most

likely death.” That would have really got you to raise your hand and say I want to be a follower. But if you instead hear, “God loves you and invites you into a loving relationship that will transform your life and those around you.” You are interested. As you say yes and want to grow deeper in your relationship then you are willing to hear words of sacrifice.

It is the same process as happens in any relationship. When you first begin to date you are not interested in hearing about sacrifice. But that same relationship turned into a marriage of many years and I am often amazed at how much one partner will sacrifice for another. Self-denial is not a part of our culture’s image of the “good life.” But neither is the Matthean Jesus’ call for denying oneself to be understood as asceticism or as self-hate. Just giving up things will not make one Christian; it will only make one empty.

This call to discipleship is based on faith in Christ and confidence in the future victory of God. It is not a matter of high human ideals or noble principles. That is, the life called for here is not based on a reasoned conclusion about how things are, but on faith that something has happened that makes everything different. To believe in Jesus and to live accordingly means to reorient one’s life toward the good news that God has acted decisively and ultimately in Jesus and we, his disciples, must follow his words and example.

Again, I see this as a message for those of us who have already said yes to following Jesus. This call to self-denial, what does that really mean? It is, for me to develop such a deep relationship with Jesus, to focus on his words and teachings and life, that we are filled with love for God. I go back to meaningful relationships that we have, whether that be with a spouse or a friend. When we have forged those deep bonds we willingly sacrifice for them. We put their needs ahead of our own. We do it, not because we have to, or are supposed to, but because we love them and want to do whatever we can to help. When we love God, we too are willing to share of our resources and time to do what God would want us to do, not because we have to but because we love God and want to do whatever we can because of that relationship.

When God is in the center of our lives we can deny some of our self-serving attitudes and actions.

But how does this help “When the World Takes the Wind Out of Your Sails?” Moore talks about this call to self-denial by looking at the cross, the ultimate sign of self-sacrifice. First the cross is a reminder that life isn’t all about us. Bad things happen to good people. When difficulties occur instead of complaining “why me,” we can instead think, “why not me?” This attitude should not mitigate our pain or loss but puts it into perspective. Sacrifice, difficulties, pain, loss, ill health and all the rest happens to all. When we focus on the cross, with its reminder that Jesus, who did no wrong, willingly suffered and died for us, it reminds us of God’s love and presence and that it isn’t all about us.

Second, when we focus on the cross it is a reminder that good can come out of very difficult and trying times. The Christian Church would not have happened apart from the tragedies of that Friday. We are a resurrection people who believe that in God there are no ultimate closed doors. We proclaim a doctrine of life eternal, a message of love. I remember this whenever I have one of those “Wind being taken out of my sails” moments. I realize that this does not define the entirety of my life. God is at work and I look towards the positives that can and will happen in the midst of this time and into the future. Good of some kind always comes out of any situation. Sometimes it is easier to find than others. Sometimes it takes months or years after the situation to really see how the reordered life after the crisis had good and healing things occur. This doesn’t mean that I believe that everything happens for good, but that some kind of positive can occur even in the most challenging of situations. This is what gives me hope when I or a family member is going through such times.

Third, when we focus on the cross it also causes us to focus on the ultimate victory through Christ. Not all things are resolved on this side of heaven. Not everything makes sense. But we believe God’s love is greater than death. That ultimately justice and good will prevail. When we face totally devastating tragedies, like the violent death of a loved one, it is this focus that will get us through.

Lastly, this focus is a reminder that we are always called to serve. The Apostle Paul when he looked at the life of Jesus and his death, summed up his thoughts in Philippians 2:7-11 as found in The Message translation

⁵⁻⁸ Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

⁹⁻¹¹ Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

We who have said yes to following Jesus must be willing to sacrifice. In giving ourselves away we find life. It gets us through those times when the “World takes the Wind Out of Our Sails.” People realize this. Think about how many times you hear of people starting foundations or becoming really involved in causes after a loved one dies. It is a way to make sense of a senseless event. It is a way to wrap that lost life with meaning. But it is also a way for those who remain to heal. When we are most hurting the best thing we can do is turn and help another as a symbol of our faith and our hope.

When we are in the midst of crisis we can focus on the cross, remembering through it how much God loves us, how God is with us, and that through God something positive will occur on the other side of this tragedy. This will help us get through the worst of events with grace and with faith and we will find new ways to serve and to share.