

Central Christian Church, Waco, Texas
"Holy Habits"
Mark 8:31-38
March 8, 2009
Rev. Kristin C. Jack

Well, we are two weeks into the season of Lent which began with our Ash Wednesday Worship experience. On that day we committed to a journey; a journey toward the Cross. But, getting to the cross isn't just a waiting game. We must accept the Ashes of repentance, we must take the long 40 day journey, we must stop at Maundy Thursday, look at Jesus on the Cross of Good Friday and then finally, we can celebrate the resurrection on Easter morning. Right now we are wading through this season that is filled with symbols and reflection. It is a time that we are to reflect, repent, and renew ourselves as we prepare to experience the Grace that comes with celebrating the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus the Christ on Easter Sunday. So, our scripture today, naturally fits with these themes of lent. This is a "popular" or "well-known" scripture, one I am sure most of you have heard at least once or twice. It's one, that at first glance we can accept as quite catchy..."oh, I see...deny myself, take my cross, follow him!" That's great! With a closer look, though, it often becomes a scripture that is really difficult to look at. After all, when Jesus denied himself and took up his cross...it definitely wasn't an easy thing to do. By his acceptance of the cross he took, he was tried, crucified and died. And now, here he is, asking us to essentially do the same. You might be thinking, "Um, I don't think so. I like my happy little life. I am not going to turn away from everything and carry a big, burdensome cross around just because I want to be like Jesus. Denying myself? Giving up the things I want to do? That's just not gonna work for me."

I think, though, that there is another way to look at this scripture. In the passages leading up to this one, we have experienced Jesus feeding the 5000, walking on the water, driving a demon out of the Syrophenician woman's daughter, feeding the the 4000, healing a blind man, teaching and preaching, and now, comes to a point where he asks his Disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" He's been doing, doing, doing, and now asks for those closest to him to answer this simple question. We know that they reply by saying, "You are the Son of Man." His calling has been named here. Moments after that discussion, Jesus tells his Disciples that the Son of Man must suffer and bear his own cross. He's describing what he must do to fulfill his calling in life. Then, he states that if anyone wants to be like him, they must deny themselves, take up their own cross and follow him.

This is where we come to a giant fork in the road. If we go one direction with this passage, the focus is on the self-denial part of things. This tends to be

the way we hear this passage interpreted often. What do we need to deny in our lives to carry the burden of the cross? While self-denial can lead to personal and spiritual growth, too often that is the emphasis of this passage. Yet, with a fork in the road, there is another direction. Wouldn't it make more sense to put the focus on the part of this request that asks us to take up our cross?

This isn't in order to avoid the part about denying ourselves and suffering, but shifting our focus from the down side of things, to the more motivating side of things. Ok, so we focus on the cross...but what is the cross in this situation? What do you believe is your cross to bear? Today I would like for us to explore the possibility that the cross we bear is our calling, our purpose; it is what God created us to be or do with our life. You see, in this passage, after the Disciples told Jesus that people say he is the Son of Man, Jesus described, then, what the Son of Man must do.

So what are you called to do and how do you go about doing it? After all, we live in an instant society...we want results overnight without having to do much of the work. You might remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the United States from Russia he was quite overwhelmed with the vast selection of instant products easily available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk--you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice--you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to my self, "What a country!"

Smirnoff was joking, but we tend to often make the same assumptions about Christian Transformation---that we can change instantly upon accepting Christ as our Lord and Savior. We sometimes expect life to suddenly be easy, clear, and laid out before us with quick fixes to any trouble we may encounter or sin we may commit. Thinking like this, we are led to believe that when someone gives his or her life to Christ, there is an instant, miraculous change in habits, attitudes and character. We go to church as if we are going to the grocery store: Powered Christian. Just add water and disciples are born not made.

Unfortunately, there is no such powder and disciples of Jesus Christ are not instantly born. They are slowly raised through many trials, celebrations and suffering, joys and temptations. I would suggest that all of us who claim Christ, have the same calling: to share the gift of Grace given to us by God through Jesus the Christ. Easy enough, right?

How are you living into your calling? What are you doing to determine what your cross looks like and feels like in your day to day life? As we live into our calling of what God wants us to be and how we as individuals will share the love of God through Christ Jesus, we must realize that it takes time. Anyone revered at being "good at what they do" got there because of healthy habits, goal setting and acceptance of their calling. Think about someone who is really good at what they do. In order to get there, they had to first accept the call or

set a goal about what they wanted to be. For example, a man doesn't just wake up one morning and become an NFL all-star. Once the decision to focus on becoming an excellent football player is made, the athlete must go through the ups and downs of creating good habits. Vince Lombardi, one of football's most accomplished and respected coaches once said, "Football is like life - it requires perseverance, self-denial, hard work, sacrifice, dedication and respect for authority." This statement echoes what Jesus is trying to say in this passage...that we all have a calling to help share God's love and grace, and to get there, there will have to be some hard work, determination, self-denial, practice, and faith.

I spent the weekend with an amazing group of youth, several are in worship with us today. The Trinity Brazos Area Youth Ministry Council held its spring planning retreat here at Central. This team of dedicated youth and adults are charged with the responsibility of planning, organizing and leading the retreats and week long camp for the high school youth of our area. I am serving as one of the co-directors and this year, the theme for the camp is going to be "Super Heroes." The idea behind this theme is that we, like super heroes all have special gifts to use for good in this world. We will spend the week not only exploring those gifts and learning about our calling, but also trying to learn new ways to develop our gifts and use them in our lives. In essence, we will be exploring how we each can take up our cross and follow Jesus. We'll learn about what habits we need to hone and which we need to let go of in order to become a superhero in our own right.

Now, besides the fact that all of you are now so intrigued by this camp's theme that you want to volunteer to be a counselor this summer, I want you to think about the making of a superhero. All superheroes seem to go through a process of discovery, of trial and error as they discover their special gifts that make them, well, "super." Some superheroes even try to deny their calling, to avoid what it is they know deep down inside they were created to be. Others, upon discovering their gifts or their call practice and learn all they can in order to be able to use their gifts for good in their world.

Now, I am not entirely avoiding the part of the scripture where Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and pick up our cross. Self-denial often comes with accepting a call. In order to live into what we are called to be and do in this world, we must develop healthy, holy habits. As we work to develop holy habits of prayer, study, discernment, worship, and fellowship, there are going to be moments where we have to change the patterns of our daily lives. Often this will require letting go of something that is part of a bad habit and other times it will require embracing something good as we develop good habits.

I have a friend in college who wanted to work on the concept of "praying without ceasing." So what she did was assign different prayers to different areas around campus. For example, each time she put her key in her post office box and turned it, she would pray for her Aunt who had a chronic illness. The tree just outside of her dorm was assigned a different prayer, and so on,

throughout the campus. In order for her to be able to achieve her goal, she had to let go of some habits like day dreaming while walking to class or being in such a rush that she didn't notice her surroundings and replaced those with the discipline required to enable her to pray more throughout her day.

A habit is an acquired pattern of behavior that often occurs automatically. Something is considered "holy" if it is dedicated or devoted to the service of God, the church, or religion. What holy habits can you develop in the next few weeks? Wouldn't it be amazing if by Easter Sunday our congregation was filled with people who have made a commitment to carry their cross (accept calling) and follow Jesus by developing some holy habits?

You might have heard of the social networking website called facebook.com. In fact, many of you are "my friends" on that website. One of my dear friends named Katie has a beautiful quote on her Facebook page that she wrote that I would like to share with you. It reads, "If I have anything really valuable to contribute to God's world, it will only emerge because I have allowed myself to tap into that divine creativity and imagination that makes me unique from every other living creature and human being." Rev. Katie Alexander

In today's busy world where our lives are all too often filled with schedules, calendars, deadlines and stress, it is important for us to step back and to embrace exactly what Katie says here....if we are to be part of sharing God's love in this world, it will only be because we allow that part of us that is unique and called by God to come through and permeate all that we do. In other words, we will have to focus on the cross. We will have to choose to accept the call, pick up the cross, trust that following Jesus will lead to good things, and develop holy habits along the way.

So how will you start that today? Remember, people say that it takes about 21 days to form a habit. That's just three weeks. Can you embrace the habit of compassion by visiting or writing notes to people on our prayer list? Will you embrace service by providing snack supper for the youth this spring? Can you develop the habit of humility by not trying to seek recognition for things you do at work or at home? Can you work on the habit of giving through tithing to the church? The list is endless.

Will you develop the holy habits you need in order to share God's love with those in your life? Pick up your cross. Accept your calling. Follow him. Amen.