

“The Largest Room in All of Christendom”

Mark 8:31-38

March 8, 2009

Dr. Kipp Wolfe

Have you ever been driving out in the country or sometimes even here in town and seen one of those flower-covered crosses by the side of the road? If you have time or are able to see, there will be a date on the cross sometimes. Every once in a while there will even be a picture; I assume of the person who died. We’ve all noticed those crosses. We wonder, “How did it happen?” “Was it really just an accident—one of those things we call a horrible accident, no one’s fault, just an accident?” “Was it a drunk driver?” “Was someone driving too fast?” “Was someone not paying attention?” “Who was affected by it?” “How many family members and friends mourn the loss of the person who died?”

The next time you see one of those crosses, I want you to remember two things. First, take seriously what happened there and drive more carefully. There are all kinds of stories about driving in Tulsa traffic. A movie came out about a year or two ago titled “There Will Be Blood.” That movie is not about driving in Tulsa traffic. If a movie were to be made about driving in Tulsa traffic, it would be titled “There Will Be Idiots.”

You’ve seen them, haven’t you? Going in and out of traffic and changing lanes. Has someone ever cut you off in traffic? I was coming up Highway 75 the other day and saw three vehicles merging from the right. I got over in the left-hand lane and the first two vehicles pulled out. The driver of the third vehicle decided to pass the other two, but it happened right when they were beside me. I had to slam on my brakes and pull almost off to the shoulder to keep from getting run over by this _____(well, you fill in the blank.) There will be idiots. We know that ahead of time, so practice the good Christian virtue of patience and forgiveness and be careful.

The next time you see one of those crosses I want you to also think of something else. I want you to think of this scripture today. It seems that, as Christians, most of us need a reminder about the centrality of the cross to our faith. I know it’s true in some churches. Did you know if you go into some churches today, you will not see a cross anywhere in the sanctuary.

I was looking around our sanctuary and we have crosses nearly everywhere, but in other churches, especially in some of the mega-churches, you can go into a sanctuary and not see a single cross today. That is not an accident. That is by design. Those ministers will tell you preaching about the cross is not popular. People don't want to hear about that.

Have you ever heard the saying, "No cross, no crown?" We could also say, "No cross, no Christ." If there is not a cross, I promise you, it is not Christianity. No cross, no Christ. It is helpful to understand the context of our scripture today. Peter has just confessed Jesus as the Christ. Think about what the disciples are thinking. "We're going to Jerusalem and we're going to be kicking tail and taking names. We might have a position on the new cabinet." However, if you remember, even back then it was difficult to find a secretary of the treasury. Do you remember who the secretary of the treasury was back then? It was Judas. Things haven't changed that much, have they? This is going to be a heady time to be a follower of Christ, at least that's what they thought.

Jesus says, "We're going to Jerusalem and I'm going to be killed. The disciples didn't hear what Jesus said next. He said "After three days I will rise again." All they heard was, "I'm going to be killed." It seems as if they didn't hear the part about taking up a cross either, and it seems as if it still happens today. Jesus, in effect, was saying to those disciples and the living Christ says to us today, "There is a cross with your name on it. Until you take up that cross you will never understand what it is that God wants you to do with your life.

I believe the church's reluctance to communicate this most basic message is our greatest failure. Part of the reason is this: Did you read in your Unbinding Your Heart book last week? Martha Grace Reese said, "God is more important than the church." Often, it seems, in the church we have behaved and believed that just the opposite is true. It is the church that is most important. It is the church that comes first. Our loyalty is to the church, even more than God. If it means saying something that offends someone that maybe causes someone to think twice about becoming a member of our church, let's don't say it even if God wants us to say it. It's the church that comes first.

Don't get me wrong. I love the church. I love all of the good that THE church does in God's world. I love that probably because of the church most people believe in God. I know also, sadly, that sometimes the best evidence there is of God is that people believe in God in spite of

what the church does. How sad that can be.

Before you think that I am just being critical of you, let me be quick to say that ministers are most often the worst. It was Kierkegaard who said, "The truth in the mouth of one whose life gives no evidence of the truth is nonsense." How much nonsense have we seen and heard from some ministers? I'm talking about ministers who call for persons to take up anything but a cross. C.S. Lewis said, "Christianity has not failed because it has been tried and found wanting, Christianity has failed because it has been tried and found difficult." I wish that were so today, but I think there is something else that is happening. Christianity is failing today because it has been tried and found trivial, not difficult."

In preparation for this sermon, I came across a wonderful poem that I had never heard before. I changed one word in the poem so it fits our situation.

Indifference

When Jesus came to Golgotha, they hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary
The crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds
and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Tulsa, they simply passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still, Jesus Cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do,"
And still it rained the wintry rain that drenched Him through
and through
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

We have been indifferent to the living Christ in our midst because we have often treated the church more as some kind of club rather than the body of Christ. Think about it. You go to nearly any city or town in our country today and you'll see a church on almost every corner. On the one hand that looks great. These people must really be religious. But remember what Richard Niebur said, "Denominations are the church's concession of defeat to the world." In other words, we say

to the world, “We’re just like you. We can’t get along with each other, so we go over here to our own little corner and practice faith the way we think it should be practiced with people who are just like we are, who believe the same way that we do.

The church is not a club. The church is the body of Christ. As members of the church, we know and understand that we are called to bear a cross, not Christ’s cross, but our own. What has happened instead is what I call “The largest room in all of Christendom.” It is not the sanctuary at St. Peter’s or the worship center in some mega-church; it is a storeroom for unused crosses. Go into that room and you will see someone who says, “We’ve got all shapes and sizes of crosses; big crosses, little crosses, plain crosses, fancy crosses, new and smooth crosses, old and rugged crosses, but they are all unused because no one will take one for themselves.

Several years ago after a Billy Graham revival, two men were walking away from the huge stadium across a parking lot. One man remarked to the other, “Billy was really good tonight, wasn’t he?” The second man said, “Yes, he’s always at his best when he preaches on the cross.” God’s message to the church today is this, “You are at your best when you *live* the cross, when you take up the cross that you are called to bear.”

Of course, a cross is a choice. Some have said crosses are always voluntary. We know that’s not right, just ask Simon of Cyrene. We choose some crosses. Other crosses are thrust upon us. A young couple has a little baby. They have waited for years for this day and suddenly they discover that this child has special needs. This cross is thrust upon them. Whether they choose to bear it is up to them. A woman lives with an abusive husband. What is the Christian thing to do? Forgive him, love him, stay with him, or leave him? The cross was thrust upon her. She had no choice. Always, we have the choice of whether we will bear the cross.

A part of the Good News of the scripture is this, if you have some kind of cross to bear, maybe it is because God believes you’re capable of bearing it. You have heard it said that God won’t give us more than we can bear, but maybe God is overestimating my ability. The truth is maybe you are *underestimating* God’s ability to help you, for this is the Good News of Lent: We don’t bear our crosses alone; remember, Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Christ walks beside us,

helping us bear our cross.

There is a wonderful story that maybe if I live to be 100 I might figure out the meaning. I understand at least a part of it and what it means for Christ to bear a cross for us and for us to bear a cross for Christ. I know there is a part of the story I will never understand.

In a small town a stranger wandered into town. After a couple of days, the most prominent citizen in town noticed that his favorite, beloved pocket watch was missing. Accusations were made. It was obvious to everyone that the stranger had stolen the watch. He was arrested; there was a trial. A young attorney in town, barely in his 30s, was appointed to represent the stranger. When he got up in court, the attorney told a sad story of how this stranger never knew his own father. . . his life was filled with one calamity after another. When the young attorney got through, there wasn't a dry eye in the courtroom. The jury was dismissed. They returned after a few minutes with a verdict of *not guilty*.

After everyone else had left the courtroom except the young attorney and the stranger, they were sitting at the table in the courtroom and the stranger said to the young attorney, "I don't know how I will ever be able to thank you for what you've done." At that point, he reached inside his tattered coat, inside the lining, in a place only he knew was there, and pulled out the watch and handed it to the attorney.

I don't understand what all this story means, but I think a part of this story means that when each of us stands in a heavenly courtroom, it will be judgment day. We will be represented by a young man not much more than 30, who practiced law and grace. He will plead his case for us. When he gets through, a chorus of heavenly angels will say, "Not guilty!" After everyone else leaves, we will say to him, "I don't know how I can ever repay you." Then we'll reach inside the lining of our tattered lives and hand him a blood-stained nail.

Amen