

“Living By the Cross”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Psalm 105:1-6

New Testament lesson: Mark 8:31-38

Curiosity was “what got me here.” Those are the words of Jerry Linenger, written in a letter to his son while orbiting earth aboard the Russian MIR space station. Linenger is a retired American astronaut and the keynote speaker for the Boy Scouts Patron Luncheon coming up on Thursday in downtown Kansas City. I looked him up ahead of time.

Reflecting on his record 132 days in orbit – the longest time in space for any American ever – Linenger concedes that curiosity may have been what got him there, but it was training and dedication that kept him going as he and his crewmates encountered one system failure after another. And yet, none of it could shake them from their mission.

In today’s New Testament lesson, both Peter and Jesus face challenges in staying focused on their mission, a mission to usher in a new age of hope and certainty in Jesus Christ. Peter and the other disciples followed Jesus with more hope and certainty, faith and commitment, energy and spirit than they had ever had before. And Jesus turns to them and says, you know, I “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Hearing this, Peter takes him aside and says, “No.” Jesus turns to Peter and says, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind, not on divine things, but on human things.”

Here, both Peter and Jesus are challenged. Peter is challenged by the reality of a world that would reject Jesus, and Jesus faces down the challenge by Peter, who would rather have Jesus save himself than fulfill God’s plan. The fulfillment of God’s plan is not easy, for us. Just like Astronaut Jerry Linenger, we face one system failure after another, and this threatens to shake us from our mission, from living into God’s vision for this world.

I don’t have to go through a list of the challenges we face given our current political reality. We are all too aware of them, aren’t we? And we each face personal challenges – challenges that can shake our faith and commitment, sap our energy and spirits, have us trudge along with little hope for a better tomorrow. Or, worse yet, we get tempted to throw in the towel, and let nature take its course.

That’s when we need our training and dedication as followers of Christ. We need to continue showing up at church, spending time with God, practicing our Christian values.

How else can we withstand the challenges of this day and age? Where else is there hope for a better tomorrow? This is precisely why Jesus foretells of his suffering, death and resurrection – to give us hope and courage in the toughest moments imaginable.

According to theology professor Daniel Migliore, Jesus lived and died for us in order to overcome a world that is “captive to the way of violence.”¹ Migliore identifies three aspects of Christ’s death that directly address our world of violence. No. 1, “Christ died for us in order to expose our world of violence for what it is...,” and to reveal the nonviolent triumphant love of God. Also, says Migliore, “Christ died so that we may know that not everything is permitted.”²

That’s kind of good news, isn’t it? In a world in which it seems that anything goes, it’s good to be reminded that not everything is permitted, that God has drawn some lines we best not cross, cannot cross and hope to survive. Doing things our way instead of God’s way serves only to tempt fate.

Take for instance the guy driving down the street in a sweat because he had an important meeting and couldn’t find a parking place. Looking up toward heaven, he said, “Lord, take pity on me. If you find me a parking place I will go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life.” Miraculously, a parking place appeared. The guy looked up and said, “Never mind. I found one.” It’s good to know there are limits to the choices we can safely make, and that there are limits to the choices of others, those misguided choices that threaten our way of life, our sense of moral decency, our convictions about right and wrong.

The second aspect of Christ’s death that Migliore points out serves to help us live amid this fallen world. In the aftermath of Christ’s death, we have the assurance of God’s love no matter what we may do, and the assurance of God’s triumph over whatever others might do in defiance of God. As Migliore says, “The crucified Christ ... (conquers) the hatred that inspires violence, and the spirit of revenge that prompts counter-violence. The cross is God’s ... gift of love” with the power to transform the world.

Whenever people gather in the name of Christ, under the grace and mercy of the Lord, in the spirit of forgiveness and unconditional love, the hold that violence has on this world is broken.

Finally, says Migliore, Christ died for us in order to usher in a new age of reconciliation and peace. The cross was not the end for Jesus. Rather, it was the beginning, the beginning of God’s love overcoming all challenges to God’s will, all that opposes to the way of Christ. As Migliore says, “God’s way of life is greater than our way of death.”³

¹ Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Michigan, 2004, p. 190.

² Jose’ Porfiro Miranda, as quoted in Migliore, *ibid.*

³ Migliore, *ibid.*

As we continue our Lenten journey toward the cross, it's good to realize and remember all the ways we fall short of God's way of life. One way we fall short is by forgetting that the cross of Jesus matters; it matters over and above any crosses we may bear.

Jesus knows we don't have it easy. That's why he says, "... Take up (your) cross and follow me." We are to bear our crosses – our struggles – in light of the cross Jesus overcame, the struggle he endured, for our sake and for our salvation. Our problem is, too often, we carry our crosses all alone. Not only do we fail to reach out to others for guidance and support, we fail to reach out to God. In our hopeless state of little faith, we fail to accept the grace of God for ourselves & others, and to embrace the power of Christ to overcome the evil that surrounds us.

When we allow despair to set in, we're actually taking Jesus down from the cross and climbing up there ourselves. In our despair, we undergo great suffering, rejection, and even death – spiritual if not physical – as if that's our cross to bear. It's not. There is a better way.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you.... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."
(Matt. 11:29-30)

When Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden light, he is saying it from a place of confidence in God, knowing that God will lighten his load, ease his way. Jesus says that to us so that we might let him carry our burdens, rather than suffer under their weight.

For Jesus, the burden is light. Why would we carry it ourselves?

Or consider this, to carry our burdens ourselves is to deny Christ. Jesus grieves when he sees us suffering. He is grieved by our stubbornness, when we fail to turn our burdens over to him. Don't give Jesus reason to grieve. Instead, trust in the Lord, and live into the victory of the cross. Give Jesus reason to smile, smile upon you.

When we let Jesus carry our burdens, we have an inner sense of peace and wellbeing, a peace and wellbeing that comes from knowing and trusting the risen Lord. Take time this Lenten season to think about the burdens you bear. What are they? Think about that, right now. What are your greatest burdens, or the burdens of this world that weigh heavy on your heart.

Now turn them over to Jesus. Lift them up to the cross. That cross is empty for a reason. That cross is your assurance of hope, and God's assurance of victory. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, we so often try relying on ourselves instead of you in times of trouble. But you are the source of our strength.

Embrace those who suffer from illnesses of mind, body or spirit; lift them up in your strength and healing presence. Comfort and encourage those who grieve.

We pray, too, that you would help resolve the conflicts in our lives – with family, coworkers, neighbors.

Our deepest longing is to follow you, and yet we fail to live into the hope and promise of your way of the cross.

Help us not to be paralyzed in the face of violence and conflict, but allow us to shape by your will so that we might truly become more faithful disciples.

It is in your name we pray, as you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**