

### **A Cross-shaped Life (Mark 8:31-38)**

He had underestimated the difficulty of climbing the vertical rock face of the mountain in winter. The ascent was up the north face where the sun cast shadows rather than rays. This combined with the shorter days of the season and near freezing temperatures slowed the climber's progress.

It was late in the afternoon when he realized he was not going to make the summit before the sun's warmth and light was extinguished by the dark. The climber decided the safest course of action was to repel back down and try again tomorrow.

Just as he began his descent, the climber's repelling mechanism jammed. Tucking himself into a small ledge, he worked to quickly to fix the problem. But all too soon, daylight descended into dark. He could no longer see the rock crevices or the ground below. It would be too dangerous to go back down in the dark. The climber knew his only alternative was to spend the night on that small ledge where he would be protected from the wind as the temperature dipped to near-zero.

But sometime in the middle of the night the repelling device slipped free pulling the climber from the small ledge. He plummeted toward the ground in a surrealistic free fall. It was really true he thought, as his life literally flashed before his eyes. He prayed that God would somehow save him from being splattered on the ground below.

And then, just as suddenly as the repelling device let loose, it jammed again, jerking the climber to a jolting stop. As if prayer had been answered, the climber hung suspended in the dark winter night. He had no idea where he was on the rock

face. Dangling in mid air in the freezing night the climber began to pray again.

He whispered his prayer over and over as the cold began to numb the climber's senses. And then, out of the darkness God spoke to him just as he was about to slip into hypothermia. God said, "What do you want me to do?" "Save my life," the climber said desperately. God responded, "Do you trust me?" "Why do you ask if I trust you? Of course I trust you," the climber responded.

"Good, then I can save your life," God said. "Listen carefully. Take your knife and cut the rope that is holding you." Shocked and dismayed, the climber panicked. "But if I do that I will continue falling to the ground. The impact from this great height will kill me." God said, "If you trust me you will cut the rope now, before you freeze to death."

The climber argued with God into the night, always refusing to cut the rope. Eventually, he drifted into unconsciousness. In the morning the climber was found by a rescue team. During the night he had died from exposure. The rescue team found him dangling, frozen from his rope – ten feet above the ground. Please pray with me.

Redeemer God, help us to loosen our grip on this temporal life and to grab hold of your divine faithfulness in us, your children. Open our hearts and minds so that we can begin to understand your call to lose our lives in order to gain the kingdom. Make my words your words this morning. In Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Jesus tells us that "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't

run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

We like what we have – our stuff. We especially value and protect our wealth. After all, we work hard for what we have. We live the good life – or at least most of us do. We are decent and moral people who regularly attend and support church. We consider ourselves to be blessed and godly – sometimes beyond reproach.

The truth of the matter is that we actually spend most of our lives trying to protect and preserve our lives. This is in direct contradiction to Jesus' warning that if we want to save our lives we must first lose them.

If we were to be honest with each other – honest with God – most of us would have to admit that we think we can have a good and righteous life apart from Jesus Christ. At least this seems to be the way we live. We tend to focus on the material or temporal world and not on the divine.

Can you imagine just what life would be like today if Jesus had focused on the material world? It's a question that's worth considering. Our moral and ethical values – our religion – would look quite different today if Jesus had sought to avoid the cross rather than pick it up and carry it to his death. What if Jesus had avoided suffering and death on a cross?

Mark tells us that Jesus wants us to embrace suffering and self-sacrifice. What does this text mean for our lives today? If we take this call to embrace suffering out of its first century Mediterranean context we can misread or misinterpret Mark. The invitation to embrace suffering can be misunderstood as glorifying suffering. Jesus is not asking us to be victims, but to loosen our grip on this life.

One misinterpretation of this text would be that we are called to suffer now in order to be rewarded later in eternity. This sounds a lot like works righteousness – the ideology that we can gain God's favor by working for it or earning it. This is contrary to our understanding of God's grace which is freely given with no strings attached – grace that can't be earned and is never deserved.

God does not glorify either self-sacrifice or suffering nor does Jesus. In fact, when we suffer God suffers right along with us. And it's important to remember that Jesus devoted much of his ministry to alleviating suffering and he empowers others to do the same. We also know that however good life seems at the moment, God never promised us an easy life. So what does Jesus mean when he says we must lose our lives in order to save our lives?

Consider the story of the rock climber. Sometimes losing our life means loosening our grip on life – letting go of those material things we try so hard to preserve. Loosening our grip on our material lives can save our spiritual lives. All God asked of that climber was to trust and have faith that God wouldn't take him where God's grace would not protect him.

It's not easy to discern the meaning of this text for our lives today. And it's even harder to live up to that meaning. Imagine for a moment you are that climber. Hanging from a rope in the freezing cold dark of night – believing you are hundreds of feet above the safety of the ground. How many of us could focus on the divine, loosen our grip on the material, and cut the rope. We need to feel like we are in the driver's seat. The reality of the divine nature is, however, that we are not in the driver's seat.

Most translations of this text use the image of the cross. Mark reminds us that Jesus said, "If any of you wants to be my follower you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me." Selfish ambition is the metaphor for the material world we seek to preserve. The

cross is a metaphor for the divine world Jesus asks us to look toward with hope. One of the ways we misread Mark's text is to overestimate the burden we bear. Another story will illustrate what I am saying here.

A young man was at the end of his rope, seeing no way out, he dropped to his knees in prayer "Lord, I can't go on," he said. "My cross is too heavy to carry." The Lord replied, "My son, if you can't bear its weight, just place your cross inside this room. Then, open that other door and pick out any cross you wish." The man was filled with relief and said, "Thank you Lord."

He did as God said and unloaded his cross. Upon entering the other room, he saw many large crosses; some so large the tops could not be seen. Then, he spotted a teeny tiny little cross leaning against a far wall. "I'd like that one, Lord," he whispered. The Lord replied, "My son that's the cross you just brought in."

The cross, which brought Jesus shame and identified him as a common criminal, bought each of us actual sinners salvation. Because Jesus' cross was heavy, our cross is light. God asks only that we not live apart from Christ, but with Christ. And because Jesus was raised from death, we can trust that our lives are not lost but have been preserved in his death and resurrection.

The One who has his mind and heart set on divine things has saved us. Jesus

sees things through the lens of God. And now that he has saved us, he asks that we too see things through the lens of God and not through our own human lenses. He named us as his own in Baptism, and names us daily through his Word, and then he calls us to do divine things: He calls us into a discipleship in which we deny our selves, and take up the cross which we now know we can bear.

He calls us to take up our cross, but this is not some sort of ascetic exhortation to quietly accept whatever random suffering may come our way. Instead, he calls us to live the life he has made possible for us through his death and resurrection – a cross-shaped life – where we speak his name without shame, and do his will, knowing that there may be a cost to our discipleship, but that we've already gained life with the divine.

A cross-shaped life has two elements – one horizontal and one vertical. The horizontal element represents our understanding that God's love is constant in our lives no matter how much we suffer in this world. The vertical element reminds us that our focus is not on this world but is other worldly – the divine – and the ever increasing ideals of faith, hope and love. Loosen your grip on the material world. Live a cross-shaped life. Loosen your grip on your life and save it.