



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, March 12, 2006
The Second Sunday in Lent

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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Sermon by
The Reverend Jonathan M. Erdman
on
Saint Mark 8:31-38
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A SERMON FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Wanting to avoid pain is a natural human desire. As a young child, I hated needles. I'd look away. I'd begin crying before the needle touched my arm. Sometimes I'd cry anticipating the needle, even though the needle had come and gone and I hadn't noticed. I just didn't want to get stuck. Sure mom and dad told me it was to help me be healthy, and sure I wanted to be healthy. I just didn't want it if it came in a needle. I had a very narrow view of what was going on in the doctor's office. I could not see beyond the needle. My parents and the doctor fortunately saw better than I did. Even though I resisted getting shots, my parents persisted.

In today's Gospel, we find Peter resisting what is meant to help him. Just before today's reading, Peter makes his confession that Jesus is the Messiah. I'm sure it was a great moment for Peter. He didn't know what messiah meant however. Jesus starts to tell his disciples just what it means for him to be the Messiah of God. Jesus says he must be rejected, suffer, die, and rise again. Mark makes the point that he said all of this openly. Jesus clearly mentioned his resurrection. But Peter could not see beyond the suffering, rejection, and death of his friend and master. At that moment, Peter saw with fear, not faith.

Had he listened, and remembered who it was that was speaking, Peter may have been able to receive what Jesus said. Peter's faith, which had been shown just seconds before, became clouded by fear. That fear caused a kind of spiritual nearsightedness. Just as I couldn't see beyond immediate situation with a needle, Peter could not see beyond his.

In Peter's mind, messiah and suffering and death did not go together. Jesus was the one who he left his life to follow. Peter's hopes rested on Jesus, and his hopes did not include the Jesus' death. Jesus said that Peter had his mind set on human things. Peter's conception of messiah may have included an earthly kingdom. He saw Jesus as the one who would heal wrong not as one who would suffer wrong. What is clear is that Peter couldn't handle the idea of Jesus suffering and death.

Peter had already given up his past life to follow Jesus. As he heard Jesus speaking of his suffering and death, Peter saw the possibility of losing his future as well. Peter had several options at this moment. He could have asked questions, he could have taken some time to think. Either of

those options at least had the possibility of him gaining deeper understanding. But Peter being Peter, he did neither. Peter reacts in his emotion, and rebukes Jesus.

It is then that Jesus has to rebuke Peter. Jesus has to shake him out of the narrow view he has taken. Jesus tells Peter and all that listen that any who would follow him must deny themselves, and take up their cross. Like Peter, most human beings do not want to take up the cross. The cross is a place of pain. We don't want to look at it, much less take up one ourselves. Jesus, hanging on the cross, shows without obstruction just what is the result of human sin: suffering, pain, and separation from God. But, Jesus hanging on the cross also shows the depth of the love of God. His is a love that will never leave us; love that is willing to endure all of our suffering and all of our pain in order to bring our hearts back to him.

And Jesus will settle for no less. The love that led Jesus to the cross is the love that calls us to take up our cross. In all of our lives there are things that keep us from following Jesus as we should. Sin by its nature twists us in on ourselves. As a result we feel the pain that follows from being turned away from God and each other. We know that something hurts. God's aim is not to offer us an anesthetic to simply dull the pain while allowing the cause to remain. In Jesus Christ, he seeks to heal the wound. But, like me, the sight of the remedy can cause us to draw back.

Our hearts can pull back because we know that part of the remedy is recognizing the wound. No one wants to explore their mistakes, or where they have hurt others. We also know that the remedy is going to mean our lives will be different. And no one wants to change how they are living their lives. We develop patterns and habits. Sometimes the patterns and habits that hurt us the most are also the ones that we cling to with the most fervor. They are what we know, and like Peter, we fear the unknown and new.

The sins we cling to can be in our mind small sins or great sins, both are damaging, and both need resurrection. For some of us we have become accustomed to complaining, and this blocks us from seeing what is good around us. For others, we get trapped in cycles of gossip, which seemingly innocent at first cause us to hurt one another. Both of these can give way to using speech as God intends, to thank him for the good we see rather than to complain, and to lift up rather than to tear down.

For others of us, destructive defense mechanisms in relationships made from mistrust, give way to openness and freedom in love and trust. Hatred that binds our heart in anger over wrong done to us, becomes freedom in forgiveness. None of this happens overnight. We will walk the way of the cross our whole lives. There will always be more ways we can come closer to Jesus.

It is in the cross of Christ that we find the remedy for our sins. It is in dying to our old ways of being that we make room for the resurrected life that Jesus calls us to live. When we are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus, we are called to seek what in our hearts pulls us away from him, and to let that die. Jesus calls us to live by faith and not fear, and to take up our cross and follow where he leads us.

Before we can begin to take up our cross, we have to remember who it is who calls us to do so. God the Son of God calls us to follow him, and it is within his love that we do so. We are never meant to bear the weight of our cross alone. It is by his ever-present help that we bear it as we follow. In the light of his love, we are able to walk the way of the cross.

I suggest that a helpful practice this season of Lent, is to spend time in prayer of self-examination and repentance. We can take time daily to ask God to help us see where in the events of the day we could follow closer. Ask for help to see where you felt trapped by sin and circumstance and did not act out of love but out of fear. Then ask God to help you change those parts of your heart.

The way forward will not always be easy, but we are supported as we walk forward. We are supported as we seek to live more fully in Christ. It is his support that helps us ask others for forgiveness, and helps us let go of the hurts we have received at the hands of others. It is his love that gives us strength to walk ever more closely with him.

And he is where we are walking. Lent moves toward Easter, the Christian life moves from alienation to reconciliation, from death to resurrection. As we continue to walk the way of the cross daily, taking up the strength of Christ and letting the old parts of our heart die, we begin to see more of him, and live more of the resurrected life he has for us. We begin to draw closer to him who drew close to us, and we find that the way of the cross is indeed the way of life. Amen.