

SERMON  
 First Lutheran Church  
 Aitkin, Minnesota

Mark 8:31-38  
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen  
 March 1, 2015

### **CHILDREN'S MESSAGE**

Kids, before Jesus died on the cross back on that first Good Friday, he told his followers that they should "**pick up their cross and follow him.**" Do you know what a "**cross**" is? I have some little pocket crosses to give you.

Crosses were terrible instruments of pain, torture and death back in Jesus' day. The crosses we are talking about were more like the size of this one that hangs up in the front of our church. They stuck those crosses in the ground and hung people from them with nails through their hands and feet.

People got nailed to crosses by the enemy Roman army. People were hung there for saying bad things about the enemy Romans. But Jesus was hung there because he:

- loved and cared for all people,
- fed hungry people,
- stuck up for people,
- forgave people,
- gave people hope that things could be better, and
- for saying that he is God.

Jesus suffered that terrible pain and death because Jesus:

- **loves people**, you and me and your parents, and all of these people too.
- Wants us **not** to be **afraid of God**, or to **forget God**, or to try to **take care of ourselves with no help from God**,
- Wants to show us, prove to us, that Jesus will **always love and care for us, be with us, never give up on us**,
- Wants to show us that **God can be trusted with all of our lives**, families, toys, school, friends...

So, Jesus invites us to **pick up Jesus' love** given to us on that old cross and to **carry that love with us every day**, everywhere we go. And here's the big secret surprise. Whether we remember to carry Jesus' cross of love with us each day or not, **Jesus' love will still be carrying us**. That's the promise this cross reminds us of. Don't forget, "**Jesus loves you!**" Amen.

## **ADULT MESSAGE**

I was about a quarter mile down the shore from our house, walking the dog, Harriet. All I can remember is that I slipped, saw my feet coming up in front of my face and bang, the back of my head hit the ice. I don't know if I lay there five seconds or five minutes. I rolled over on my side, pushed upward, staggered to my feet and immediately was hit with how bright everything was. My eyes weren't working very well. As I raised my head and looked around, the shoreline and houses didn't look familiar. **"Where am I?"** Then I spotted my tracks in the snow. **"I can follow my tracks home. Come on Harriett, let's go home."** I have no recollection of arriving at our yard, unlocking the front door, or taking the dog's coat and boots off. I remember thinking that I needed to go and lie down in the living room. Too weak and tired, I just slid, spread-eagle, onto my belly on the dining room floor. I knew my phone was on my belt, but I couldn't get myself to call. I remembered my wife, Jennifer, would be home from work soon. She found me, head covered with blood, and a quick trip to the emergency room followed...

As I lay on that gurney waiting for the doctor to help me, my mind, very cloudy and heavy, considered, **"Am I going to be alright? Is this a big deal? Will I have to miss work?"** At some point, the thought occurred, **"Am I going to die?"** Early on, my word to God was, **"I'm yours Lord, whatever happens. Thanks for letting me be a child of God."**

Sometime after the doctor's first visit, while waiting for the CT scan, I came to the thought, **"Will this head injury lead to an early onslaught of Alzheimer's?"** That disease has so often victimized my family tree.

Peter didn't want to see Jesus die, any more than he was ready to die himself. Peter got a glimpse of the end of life and he didn't want to go there. Peter and the other disciples had been following Jesus around the countryside for almost three years. They had witnessed his compassion for hurting people, his healing power, and his willingness to stand up to tyrannical authorities. In Jesus they had witnessed for themselves God's deep, rich and gracious love. Because of Jesus, they dared to hope for a new and better future with the Roman occupying army gone and Israel returned to its heyday of glory, might and wealth. In Jesus they saw God's great love for them and for all people.

Peter and his friends couldn't bear to lose Jesus. He couldn't die. But they **had** to lose him. He **had** to die. Jesus told them that he "**must**" undergo great suffering, be rejected by the religious and political authorities and be killed... Peter tried to talk Jesus out of it. But Jesus had to die. It was God's will. It comes from that "**must**" word. In Greek, the word is "**dei**." That little word means "**this is a part of God's divine plan**" for the salvation of the world. God decided to pursue us humans through death on a cross.

Jesus had to die for you and for me, so:

- we'd **know where home is,**
- where **unconditional welcome awaits,**
- where **love, hope and help is.**

Jesus had to die for us so that there would never, ever be a "**God-forsaken**" person or place:

- when we **face all that life throws at us,**
- when we have a **concussion,** go to the **marriage counselor,** receive the **cancer treatment** or reside in the **Alzheimer's unit,**
- when we face the **death of a loved one,**
- when we face **our own death,**

Jesus **has been** there ahead of us, **is** there with us, **will be** there with us forever!

- At your birthday party, baptism, family reunion, and lakeside sunset.

There is **no lost place, never alone,** always living in **God's love and peace,** whether we are in the midst of life's greatest struggles or life's greatest joys. That's why Jesus had to die on that cross – **to show us how far God will go to be there for us.**

I had a faithful parishioner, younger woman, husband and a couple of kids. They worshiped regularly for years. Finally one time, she asked me why we pastors always **preach pretty much the same thing.** She summarized, "**God loves you, died and rose again for you, forgives you, cares for you, and is always with you...** She went on, "**I know all that stuff already. Isn't there something else that you could be preaching about?**"

I'm not sure what I told her at the time, but I do recall her speaking with me about this sometime later. Our second conversation about this occurred after her **husband had lost his job,** after her **son had fallen into**

**depression** and gotten into trouble and while she was **soul-searching** about what her future might hold. This time her conversation went something like this. **“Now I understand why you’ve kept telling us again and again, ‘God loves you and is with you.’ I’ve been through a time where I’ve really needed to cling to those promises in order to keep moving forward in my life...”**

**“God loves you, is always with you and will never let you go?”** Same old promises - **boring?** Not when you are lying **flat on your back** with the world spinning out of control around you... Not when **your wife is diagnosed with breast cancer**... There is a dear young man that I know very well. When his wife recently received a scary diagnosis, he breathed out the following desperate words, **“There can’t be a God if my wife has breast cancer. I can’t live without her.”**

Just like Peter when Jesus said he was going to die, just like me lying half-unconscious on the gurney, this young man was in an **unfamiliar place**, **facing death** and **not wanting to be there**.

When I staggered to my feet, shaken and uncertain, I knew that I had to get home. I could hardly tell where I was. Then I saw the tracks in the snow. **“I can follow my tracks home. Come on Harriett, let’s go home.”**

My young friend was baptized and raised in a Christian home. Sunday school, confirmation – he heard again and again these **same old promises** about a **God who is loving and faithful**. His wife has been baptized too, as were their kids. But they have been struggling. Just like most every young family, the world is crazy busy, money doesn’t stretch far enough, husbands and wives fight, kids misbehave – and **they try to make it all work, all by themselves**. Pretty soon, there is no God.

**No, God is still there**. But the world knocks us silly and we start thinking that we have to face it all alone. Did Harriett the dog help me to get safely home after I fell on my head? Was it the tracks in the snow? Was it Jesus?

My young friend has been looking for tracks in the snow too. He’s been looking for Jesus too. He and his family have been back to try out worship again the past couple of weeks. They are looking for hope and help in the face of her cancer diagnosis. Jesus says that the tracks in the snow that

will lead us home are cross-shaped. Maybe you carry a cross in your pocket so that you can remember what to look for. Maybe you carry a cross in your heart. Maybe you entrust your life safely into God's love and care every day, every moment, awake or asleep. Carrying Jesus' cross is more than just offering up an occasional prayer. It is more than just showing up for worship once in a while. **Jesus invites us to literally lose our life in him.**

Jesus is not asking us to be religious or to be good enough. Jesus is inviting us to live each and every day totally embraced and carried by God. Are my young friends with the breast cancer diagnosis abandoned by God? No. They **may be closer to God** now than **they have ever been**, and God has **always** been there for them. They just forgot about God...

So, it's **not**, "**if she has breast cancer there is no God.**" Rather, it is, "**God help us. God help us to believe. God help us to trust our lives safely into your keeping. God help us no matter what.**" Was God there when I went head over heels? Yes. Was God there when my wife and friend hauled me to the emergency room? Yes. Was God there when the doctor and staff examined me and determined my diagnosis? Yes. Was God there when I thanked God for claiming me as a child of God? Yes. Was God there as all of the prayers were offered up for me, as the cards, calls and visits came my way? Yes. Will God be there if I am someday overcome by Alzheimer's? Yes. And when I die? And when I join all the saints who have gone on ahead to God's great family reunion? Yes. Yes. A thousand times yes!

I saw some tracks in the snow that I thought might lead me to home and safety. Do you see any tracks in your life? Are they shaped like a cross? Jesus says they are. Thanks be to God for loving us so much. Welcome home dear child of God. Amen.