

February 28, 2021 - 2nd Sunday of Lent - Sermon

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Most of us have encountered occasions when we have been told 'this is the way to do this'. Sometimes the instruction comes with the words 'this is the best way to do this' and sometimes, 'this is the only way to do this'. We all have different reactions to these kind of statements. The reactions are based largely on our feelings rather than an analysis of the facts. The last example I used - this is the only way - is rarely met with acceptance on the part of the learner. We tend to reject the idea that there is only one way to do something because that is so rarely true but there are examples of this reality that are part of our everyday life. There is only one direction to turn a screw when you are installing something. There is only one way to count to ten - whether fast or slow you have to name all the numbers. There is only one way to install plumbing correctly and plenty of ways of installing it almost correctly. (I can almost hear some of you saying, 'but what about...?') When dealing with this concept we may be drawn into reactions that have little to do with our intellect and much to do with our feelings. We are also influenced to a large degree with our personal experiences in the realm of self-discovery.

Many of us are self-taught. I remember learning how to play a guitar on my own with the help of an instruction booklet. I managed to produce some decent sounds and thought I was doing quite well. An opportunity came for me to take some lessons and there I learned that I had adopted some bad habits that did allow me to produce some good music but were going to prevent me from getting much better at playing. My instructor was very kind because my first reaction was to say - this is the way I play so deal with it. I thought I knew the correct way of playing but my instructor gently (sometimes not so gently) demonstrated that I had missed the mark so if I wanted to get better I had to get back to the basics in the correct way. While there are many styles of guitar playing there are portions of the skill that can really only be done one way. Learning how to do things on our own is often a very helpful thing but at times an expert in the field is necessary. These experts, because of their knowledge and experience, are able to point out a better way of doing things. This same fact comes into play when it comes to our lives because it must be recognized that we are also self-taught in many of our behaviours and our way may not be the best way. Jesus stated on one occasion that, "I have come to bring you life and life in abundance" which suggests that fullness of life is something that can be achieved. So when it comes to living a life of fullness we all have an opinion about the correct way of going about it and some of those opinions, we must admit, are not all that close to achieving the goal. We have largely been 'self taught' in the area of living a life of love and grace and we have managed to impart some of that love and grace but perhaps we can do better. During this season in particular we are asked to allow a light to be shone on the way in which we do things and the way in which God wishes us to do things and it makes a good deal of sense to choose the latter.

We are brought into this fellowship through our faith in Jesus and marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit through baptism. Our eyes are turned to Jesus, 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' and he is the one

who gathered his disciples after St. Peter made that wonderful confession, “You are the Christ” as recorded in Mark 8:29. Part of what Jesus was doing with his disciples throughout their journey was giving them a living example of how to live the life God wanted them to live. As they journeyed from town to town he did teach them with words but he also taught them using his actions. He showed them how to trust in God for their food. He showed them how to deal with persecution. He showed them how to express mercy and forgiveness and offer God’s healing power. He showed them how to ‘turn the other cheek’ and many other lessons. On the day of Peter’s confession Jesus began to try to show them how to stick to a mission in the face of tremendous opposition and personal fears. Peter and the other disciples thought they knew the correct way for the mission of the Messiah to happen but as the events unfold we see that they did not yet understand what Jesus was trying to say. The disciples rebuked the teacher whom they had just declared as the Messiah when he told them that his path was going to lead him to his death but also to his resurrection. “This can’t be!” they said to which he answered, “Get behind me, Satan!” The correct way for Jesus to live a life of God was going to require Jesus to be willing to become the sacrifice for sin and there was no escaping this fact. The only way for the world to be saved was for Jesus to be crucified and nothing was going to stop him from taking that path. There was an occasion when Jesus was told that he should find another way and he rejected those temptations as well. Perhaps Jesus recalled that trying time in the desert and saw the same hand at work in his disciples as they tried to persuade him to take another path. Jesus goes even further than his rebuking of Peter when he declares that “if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34) It would seem that there is only one way to follow Jesus and that is to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow.

This, of course, is a hard reality to face and most of us look for other options - easier paths. We attempt to soften the message to make it more attractive to those who are searching or attempt to avoid the point of decision ourselves. The tendency to ‘soften the message’ is understandable and it can and does lead many into the household of faith but at some point in every believer’s life we must come to grips with the fact that following Jesus requires this step of complete surrender to the will of God. We may try to find a loophole but after a life-time of searching I have not found one. If you are going to follow Jesus there can only be one boss and that can’t be you. Just like in the game, ‘follow the leader’ it only works if there is one leader. A gathering of children each doing their own thing may be fun to look at but it isn’t ‘follow the leader’. There is only one way to be a disciple of Jesus - to take up our cross and follow. But as we contemplate this reality I believe it is also important to remember how Jesus dealt with his own disciples. Those early disciples did not understand exactly what Jesus was saying and, while Jesus didn’t soften the message, he showed tremendous patience and forgiveness toward them. Jesus allowed God’s Holy Spirit to work in and through his disciples in their various stages of understanding without judging where they were in the journey. At the same time he did not hide the fact that in order to follow where he was leading the disciples would be required to ‘deny themselves’. As those first disciples wrestled with this difficult teaching Jesus continued to love them and pray for them and entrust

them to the care of God.

As we have journeyed with Jesus there have likely been similar times for us - times when Jesus held out a particular ideal to which we were not prepared to rise. While not ignoring the importance of obeying Jesus' commands let us recognize that even his first disciples were given chances to get better. The season of Lent is a time for contemplation, for repentance, and for hearing once again the promise of new beginnings. Jesus, the ever compassionate, will continue to invite us to take the steps needed for us to grow into the disciples he enables us to be and will always accept us back when we fail. The picture I have in my mind is that of a parent trying to teach a child how to skate. There is a 'right way' to do it but the child insists on trying it many other ways. The parent does not simply dismiss the child when the first, or even the tenth, failure happens but constantly urges the child to keep trying and follow instructions. I often view the season of Lent in this way. My Father in heaven is trying to help me learn how to live a life of fullness and puts certain instructions in my path to help me accomplish this. I fail often but am urged to keep trying. As we encounter God's presence in our lives through our prayers and readings, in our stillness and our busy-ness I believe we will be blessed with this picture of God as a loving Father who sent His Son to share the way to live life the way God intended. As much as I have sometimes failed to live up to the standard I can honestly say that my life has been far richer and closer to abundance through my relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The times when I have managed to 'deny myself, are some of the most profound moments of my life and the memory of them urges me on to keep following Jesus in this way. I have learned that Jesus' way is the best way.

Jesus leads us into His Father's hands and shows us that God is merciful and gracious and abounding in compassion and that God has a plan to enable human beings to live a completely fulfilled life. The path from where we are to where God wishes us to be crosses through the need to 'deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus'. Some will not be ready to take that step - God does not reject them but demonstrates patience. Some will take the step and then fall back into bad habits - God does not reject them but demonstrates patience. Some will take the step and persevere, along with some missteps, and find the truth of Jesus' promise of an abundant life. The season of Lent is an opportunity for all of us to prayerfully ask God for help in taking another step toward that fulfilling life. May God bless you with a holy Lent.

A prayer for the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday after the First Sunday of Lent.

O God, you have made of one blood all the people of every nation on the face of the earth and you sent your blessed Son Jesus Christ to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that all the people of the world will feel after you and find you; and hasten, O Lord, the fulfillment of your promise to pour out your Spirit upon all flesh; through the same, your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.