

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – 2024

Isaiah 40:21-31

1 Corinthians 9:16-27

Mark 1:29-39

Why some and not others? That's shorthand for a theological question that has bedeviled students of the Scripture for millennia. Why are some saved and others are not? Why does Jennifer have faith and Jacob doesn't? Jennifer and Jacob both grew up in the same household, indeed, they are twins; same parents, same schools, same congregation, same confirmation class, same, same, same. And yet, Jennifer embraces the beauty of Christianity while Jacob couldn't get far enough away from God and His Word. Jennifer's faith is robust and she is simply overjoyed that God would love her, forgive her, serve her, die and rise again for her. Jacob is atheistic, cold of heart and would gladly spit in God's face if he thought that he could get away with it. Jennifer and Jacob's parents are mystified. Why some and not others? In death, Jennifer is heaven-bound. Jacob... not so much. Why are some saved and not others?

Well, let's do a little Christianity 101, shall we? True or False? God wants all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Yep, that's true (1 Timothy 2:4). True or False? We are saved by grace, God's work alone. When we were dead in trespasses and sins, God made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved. Yep, that's true (Ephesians 2:5). True or False? Christ died, paid for the sins, of all people? Yep, that's totally true. 1 John chapter 2 says as much, as does 1 Peter 3 and Romans 5 and Isaiah 53 (I could go on). Why are some saved and others aren't? That question is called the *crux theologorum*. It's Latin; translated it means the "cross of the theologians." Why are some saved and not others? I don't know. It's an unanswerable question. I *do* know that man's so called "free will" doesn't enter into why we are saved – that would deny grace. Before conversion, we're dead spiritually and God makes us alive. Again, our salvation is His work alone. Some say that God predestines some folks to heaven and predestines some folks to hell, that's why some are saved and others aren't. Nope; that's a horrible idea that has zero biblical evidence. God wants all men to be saved. Christ died for all men.

Why are some saved and not others? I don't know. In the same vein, I don't know why some folks have what seem to be exceedingly heavy crosses to bear and others have, seemingly, very light crosses. I have seen some very godly people suffer horribly. I have seen some less than stellar human beings prosper. I had two brothers afflicted with muscular dystrophy. I am healthy, another brother, Robert William as well. Why is that? My brother John Byron asked my mother, "why me?" My brother John Byron asked God, "why me?" Have you known that pain? Have you ever attempted to comfort someone who is having trouble bearing their cross? Have you wept for a loved one who was suffering and you were powerless to help? One of the prayers that I was taught early on as a pastor had a line that requested God to remove the affliction from the sick or troubled individual, but if that was not God's will that He would give that person strength to bear their cross in cheerful submission to God. Have you prayed that prayer? "Lord, if you will not take this cross from me, grant me the strength to bear it in cheerful submission to Your holy will." Have you prayed that prayer?

Why does God lay crosses on us? He is always a Teacher. Patience, hope, trust, fortitude, compassion, empathy – have your crosses taught you any of these? Humility; one of the most elusive virtues is humility. Does a Christian being blessed with an unwelcome cross ever give rise to humility? God works all things together for good. The full quote is this: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). The cross that you are bearing may be for the benefit of someone else, who sees you and your faith as a model, who is inspired, heartened that faith, that God can and will strengthen people in great need. Our Father will also discipline us. Our Father will give us a cross that leads us to abandon vice, abandon faithless apathy, abandon hypocrisy.

Simon’s mother-in-law lay ill with a fever. One of the other Gospel writers, Luke, tells us that it is a “great fever,” literally a “great fire” (Luke 4:38). Her life is clearly in danger. Simon and Andrew, James and John tell Jesus about her. Do you know what we call that? We call that a prayer. Is that you? Do you pray for others? Do you intercede before our Father, before our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for those who need His aid? The people in this holy house are those whom God has given you to help you bear your crosses. That is one priceless thing about a congregation of believers. We are a family. God builds this family. God builds this family for a reason. We commune at Christ’s altar together, knowing that He has knit us together as a body, knowing that we suffer together with our brothers and sisters, knowing that we are not alone. The strength that is in one believer is loaned, offered, conveyed to another believer. That’s what it means to be members of Christ’s body. We defend one another against Satan. We uplift one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19). The strength of Christ is in you and that strength is to be used for others. Look for the opportunity. Freely you have received. Freely give (Matthew 10:8).

It really is astounding. Simon’s mother-in-law appeared to be at death’s door. Jesus came into that sick-room and took this woman by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her. It was an epiphany. Health vanquishes this uncontrolled fever. Healing, restoration – Christ’s ministry to her was pure gift, pure intervention. And this priceless woman immediately sets herself to the task, the joy of serving others. There is not a single descriptive word between her healing and her beginning to serve others. That is odd and beautiful and theologically magnificent. Who serves you in this place? With what does He serve you? A great fire is in you. Sin produces sickness of every variety. Conflict between brothers because of pride; dark visits to dark domains prompted by lust; greed and gluttony and deceit are short-term frenemies that give rise to long-term guilt, long-term shame. You’re sick and Christ brings His death and resurrection to your soul. He took all that which is evil, and vain, and corrupt and idolatrous and He died bearing it. That is atonement. That is paying the price. That is a loving God who intervenes and takes away your sickness. The crucified and risen Christ serves you in this place. You feast on His forgiveness, His holiness, His love and His blessing. And then you serve others.

Simon’s mother-in-law is the rhythm of our lives. The Lord Christ serves us and then we serve Him by serving those who have their own crosses to bear. On this occasion, in Capernaum, Jesus healed everyone who was brought to Him. Not everyone is healed. There were people with afflictions that were not delivered from their crosses. Not everyone is healed; not then; not now. No cross lasts forever. That may sound like paltry comfort to some of you. Crosses end. Life in this world ends. Life with Christ *does not* end. Heaven *does not* end. Listen to this

Word of God and cling to it. “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). Memorize that. Pray that verse when you suffer and ask God to strengthen you.

Jesus said this: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). The cross, the cup which Christ drank, is your salvation. That cross was the Father’s will because of His great love for you. Now you drink of Christ’s blood and are strengthened to walk the path that He blazed for us all. He sets a table before you in the presence of your enemies (Psalm 23). Sin and death, your enemies, are defeated. God’s glory is here. God’s radiant presence awaits you in heaven. Today, we celebrate the resurrection. Today, we are together as church. Today, we are profoundly strengthened.