

5th Sunday in Lent – B
LSB #427
Text – Mark 10:32

And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, & Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, & those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, He began to tell them what was to happen to Him...

AMAZED & AFRAID

A pastor was onboard a flight from Chicago to California, when the plane ran into rather severe turbulence. As it got worse, the passengers became more & more alarmed. Finally, even the flight attendants began to grow concerned.

Eventually, one of them noticed there was the title Reverend in front of the pastor's name on the passenger list. So the attendant came over to the man & said, "Reverend, this is quite frightening. Do you suppose you could, I don't know, do something religious?" The pastor thought about it for a moment, then he got up & started passing an offering basket.

In our culture today, far too many people have no idea how frightening, difficult & hopeless the life ahead of them can turn out to be. In that state, of ignorance is bliss, they truly do "feel" no need for a well grounded & daily relationship with Jesus Christ. If life is too easy then a person never learns how to apply the teachings of Jesus to the hard spots in life.

Religion is not taken seriously. It's looked at as irrelevant. Like the joke used to introduce the sermon, religion is made fun of – the pastor knows nothing more than to pass an offering basket around the doomed airplane. Even church members wink & laugh at those who make their spiritual life a priority over sports, or a job, or recreation.

But in the Gospel reading for today, the disciples were no longer snickering or laughing. Instead, "...they were amazed, & those who followed were afraid." They were amazed because even though all the opposition to Jesus is centered in Jerusalem He fearlessly makes His way toward that city. They were afraid because undoubtedly they knew the fate of other teachers who had dared to oppose the church leadership at Jerusalem. Remember, executions were a common event in the days of King Herod & Pontius Pilate. Even the Jewish people considered stoning someone to death to be a normal course of discipline. Are you afraid of following Jesus, or does your problem have more to do with boredom in following Jesus?

Do you think Christians who are prisoners of war get bored with following Jesus while they're locked in their cell or getting beaten & tortured? Do you believe Christians find Jesus irrelevant in the parts of the world where they're tortured & killed for their faith? Can you even imagine the fear they must confront each & every day of their lives? **PAUSE**

On the other hand I think all of us have experienced fear of a different kind. It's that feeling cropping up inside when we're asked to volunteer for something like serving on one of the various boards or committees here. Haven't you felt that desire to pull back or step aside? Haven't you thought to yourself, "I'm afraid I don't have enough time?"

Or maybe that fear comes when a special appeal is made for an offering to support a particular ministry of the congregation? "I'm afraid I won't have enough money for the things I want, or the things my family wants." **PAUSE**

Intellectually, we recognize that fears like those are of a far different nature than the fear of being persecuted for our faith, but emotionally it's difficult to separate the

two. Fears about giving up my time or my money are nowhere near as legitimate as fear of being persecuted, but you & I let our fears about money or time hold back our faith in Jesus nonetheless.

Why is it that so many of our choices are driven by our fears? As Franklin Roosevelt rightly said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Our own fears cause us to do harm to ourselves, & far more harm than anyone else does. In a school the Navy sent me to they taught that it is panic, our reaction to our own fears, that causes 90% of the deaths during shipboard accidents or when attacked by the enemy. In other words, 90% of those deaths are entirely preventable if we simply resist the urge to be afraid.

The Apostle John commented this way, “...fear has to do with punishment, & whoever fears has not been perfected in love.” In other words, fear is unnecessary for Christians, who are constantly, by the power of God’s Spirit, being made complete in love. And because we can be certain of our heavenly Father’s love for us, there truly is nothing to be afraid of.

Yet, it’s one thing to know that intellectually. It’s quite another to live it emotionally, & it’s even harder to live it spiritually because we have the devil working in direct opposition to it. He wants us to be afraid that we are going to miss out. We’re going to be shortchanged. We’re not going to get everything that’s coming to us.

The Gospel reading makes clear that James & John fell for just that temptation as they said to Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Then the other 10 disciples fall for the exact same temptation as, “...they began to be indignant

at James & John,” when they heard of their request. Fear of not getting our fair share drives our choices.

That’s why we feel the urge to back off, to hide, when someone asks us to serve. We see it clearly when it comes to being last, when it comes to being the one who serves instead of the one being served. The problem is, “...whoever fears has not been perfected in love.” If we are afraid it’s because we’ve been resisting the love of Jesus Christ.

As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem His followers were afraid. As Jesus was being led off to be crucified His followers were afraid. As the women found the tomb empty, on Easter morning, the Gospel of Mark says they were afraid. Your fears & mine are all driven by our sinful nature, by the fact that in some way we are resisting the perfect love of our Savior.

Are you afraid of serving? Are you afraid of giving? Then you need more of Jesus’ love.

So Mark introduces Jesus’ teaching on being a servant in this way, “And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, & Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, & those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, He began to tell them what was to happen to Him...”

“...we are going up to Jerusalem, & the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests & the scribes, & they will condemn Him to death & deliver Him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him & spit on Him, & flog Him & kill Him. And after three days He will rise.” Jesus endured all of that to make perfectly clear how great is His love for you.

A well grounded & daily relationship with Jesus Christ recognizes that our greatest enemy in life is not our sinful selves, no matter how damage we cause with fear & panic. It is not the devil, no matter how much he wants us to suffer in hell with him. No, our greatest enemy was God Himself.

Because God is holy, there is no alternative. Sin cannot go un-judged, or unpunished. Yahweh must inflict the sentence of eternal death, but out of His love for us, He sent His only begotten Son to take our place. That heroic self-sacrifice has no equal. Jesus put Himself last in order that we might be first. He came not to be served, but to do the serving.

Jesus knew, & still knows, our fears. When we step aside, He steps forward. When we seek revenge, He grants forgiveness. When we cast the first stone, He takes the hit. On those occasions when we do love each other, it's, "...because He first loved us." And that's why Jesus died at Golgotha, to make it possible for us to love each other through serving each other.

"...whoever would be great among you must be your servant..." If being a servant is something we're afraid of it's because we've not yet been perfected in love. "For fear has to do with punishment," but serving is not punishment. Rather, serving is the measure of God's love as it lives within us. Jesus demonstrated, at the cross, how greatly God's love was within Him, that He would die for us while we were yet sinners. Satan's lie is that serving is for losers. As we believe the lie fear puts its grip upon us. As we believe the truth, that we are forgiven, Jesus sets us free to love, & to be loved, without fear. To love others is to serve them.

But we, & our neighbors, cannot love others until we first have been loved. So it is that our Lord & Savior has called us to live lives of service through giving of ourselves. He did so in order that others might come to know Him & be set free from their fears.

Even if people aren't prisoners of war they may be prisoners of drug or alcohol addiction. Your neighbors may not be in a Muslim country getting persecuted for their faith, but their own unbelieving nature may be persecuting them from within. In one way or another, fear holds all of us hostage. Knowing Jesus Christ will set people free, & knowing Him sets us free.

Serving is not punishment. In fact serving others is how our heavenly Father gives them life. It's how we have been given life. In our culture today, far too many people have no idea how frightening, difficult & hopeless the life ahead of them can turn out to be. Sadly, even more people have no idea how to overcome the fears, the difficulty & the hopelessness.

Only Jesus Christ has the power & the life to give joy & hope in spite of the corrupting effects of sin. Our natural fear of serving allows our insignificance to demonstrate itself. God's greatness is revealed by our willingness to be last & to serve. Jesus' death & resurrection is about this kind of greatness. It's frightening & amazing stuff because it's so unnatural to us.

Yet, as people live in this broken, fallen world, suffering with fear & greed & loneliness, we have opportunities, prepared in advance for us by God, to shine the light of His love upon those hurting lives. Our serving brings hope to others. Our sacrifices make Jesus' religion relevant to people who are struggling because of sin. Religion isn't

boring when another person's love & service to us bring light at the end of our tunnel of sinful despair. As we live in the light of our Savior's love for us, giving an offering is not seen as a burden, but as an opportunity to give life & joy to someone who's lacking both. "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, & to give his life as a ransom for many."

In that statement alone each of us can find forgiveness & rest from all our trials & all our sorrows. Amen.

When the woes of life o'ertake us, hopes deceive, & fears annoy, never shall the cross forsake us; Lo, it glows with peace & joy. Bane & blessing, pain & pleasure by the cross are sanctified; peace is there that knows no measure, joys that through all time abide. In the cross of Christ we glory, tow'ring o'er the wrecks of time. All the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime. Amen.