

“A LADDER OR A CROSS”

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus and His disciples left Galilee and went up to the villages near Caesarea Philippi. As they were walking along, He asked them, “Who do people say I am?” 28 “Well,” they replied, “Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets.” 29 Then He asked them, “But who do you say I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Messiah.”

30 But Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about Him. 31 Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later He would rise from the dead. 32 As He talked about this openly with His disciples, Peter took Him aside and began to reprimand Him for saying such things.

33 Jesus turned around and looked at His disciples, then reprimanded Peter. “Get away from me, Satan!” he said. “You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s.”

34 Then, calling the crowd to join His disciples, He said, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. 35 If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life, for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. 36 And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? 37 Is anything worth more than your soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when He returns in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”

There are two contemporary works of art that have rare symbolic power: the Vietnam War Memorial and the AIDS Quilt. Both address the mystery of suffering. Both restructure reality to enable us to deal creatively with the mystery of suffering. I have to confess that my life has largely been unimpacted by art. We have, as a culture, largely lost the impact of art. And if it weren’t for Grand Rapids Art Prize I still would know little about it. But there is a power in art to convey things that are difficult to put into words. Just like music it can speak to your soul.

In the last 500 years, a work of art which has exerted this kind of symbolic power on a large number of people is the “Isenheim Altarpiece,” which was completed in 1515. Only 510 years ago to be exact! Here is a copy of what it looks like on the screen.

[NOTE 1] One art historian has called it a “work of such tremendous and dismal grandeur of expression that nothing on earth seems to equal it.” This altarpiece, measures 10 feet long when closed and 21 feet long when opened. It is 8 feet high and is now housed in a museum in Colmar, France.

The order of St. Anthony commissioned the altarpiece for their monastery at Isenheim. They asked Mathias Grunewald – he and Albrecht Durer were considered the

greatest artists of the Italian Renaissance – to present their chapel with something that would bring healing and cleansing to the poor and diseased, something especially for those afflicted with one of the most horrible diseases ever recorded in human history, a disease that wreaked more devastation on the human body than even AIDS – the gangrene producing, decay producing, rotten flesh disease called St. Anthony's Fire. (It's interesting that centuries later people would name a bar after a flesh eating disease yes?) How did the monks expect the sick to find healing and cleansing in front of this altarpiece? What kind of therapy was in this painting? The answer was in the successive revelations unveiled by the opening and closing of the altarpiece. (I find it fascinating how we have largely lost the idea of the power of art in our culture)

Look at the picture. When the wings of the altarpiece were closed, the sick and the poor gazed at the crucifixion panel, the most gruesome, tortured, agonized, tormented, almost unbearable, crucifixion scene ever painted. There, under a monstrous crown of thorns, was a dangling, pitiful body with twisted limbs, covered with countless lacerations and rivulets of blood. The scene was one of unbearable agony. [NOTE 2]

When the wings of the altar piece were opened, however, the dark, deserted landscape and the blue-black sky were driven away by a blaze of light. Suddenly, the poor, sick pilgrims stood in awe before three spectacular panels. The first panel contained the most unusual Annunciation scene in the world of art; the second depicted the angel Choir with seraphs and cherubim celebrating the Virgin and newborn child; and the third panel revealed the most glorious resurrection scene every portrayed, with Jesus exploding from the grave.

Where was the healing? As Jesus taught in today's gospel lesson, when a crucified body is entered, life and health are found. When the body is broken, when blood is poured out, community is born and healing is begun. Pain and suffering open to birth and resurrection. In the words of St. Augustine: "The greater the joy, the greater is the pain which precedes it." [NOTE 3]

Or in the lesson Jesus sought to teach His disciples, in our text for today, before He could reach "the joy set before Him," Jesus had to pass through the pain of many "dark nights" and "shadowed valleys." The journey of Jesus' life teaches us, as it taught those with St. Anthony's Fire, that before resurrection sunrise, we must pass through ashes and lashes, spit and spear, thorns and throngs.

You may think you have it together. You may be successful, affluent, well-educated, experienced, respected, but until you understand the secret power of the "Isenheim Altarpiece" and why it heals you are unprepared for being a disciple of Jesus. For the "Isenheim Altarpiece" is a sort of Rosetta stone, a reference source for understanding the meaning of discipleship. And the key to unlocking and unleashing the power of this Rosetta stone is the figure of Mary, the most pronounced and interesting figure, apart from Jesus, in the altarpiece. [NOTE 4]

The angel Gabriel brought Mary a message of authority, not love. To answer the question of your authority as a disciple, your calling as a "minister," you must come to terms with Mary. To be a disciple means you understand what it must have been like to

be Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary is central—disciples of Jesus must come to grips with her.

You have heard the carpenter's call, you have been chosen to receive God's favor. You, the least, the last, the lost—have been called, like Mary, to give birth to the Christ child, to bring Christ to this earth, to make Jesus come alive to men and women everywhere!

There is a popular religious mentality that is filling the air today. I believe it is hurting our cause terribly. It says that to find favor with God is to be blessed by health, wealth, and happiness. This is all that many Americans want in a religion. They want what we will call for today, a "Jacuzzi Jesus"—an experience that will leave them relaxed, warm and bubbly and yet, at the same time, feeling fit and trim when they get out—like they've just gotten in shape. [NOTE 5]

But the favor of a "Jacuzzi Jesus" is the favor of Christian Hedonism, which leads most certainly to death of the soul. The favor of a "Jacuzzi Jesus," turns the divine Word being born in you from Logos to Logo—from the incarnation (God become flesh) of "God's reason" which is the literal translation of Logos, to the incarnation of society's reason, the logo standards and symbols of the realm religion and temple religion, with all the attendant logos in our culture announcing who is in and who is out. Religion is getting as bad as fashion. Kids have to have jeans with the right label on them or they are called geeks. If their jeans say rustler, wrangler, or nothing at all they are automatically less. Jeans 25 years ago had to say Calvin Klein, Silver Tabs, or Gerbouw on them. In 2025 the most popular brands are Levi's, Agolde, Citizens of Humanity, Frame, J.Crew and The Row. (I googled it). But logoes have nothing to do with how spiritual one is or is not!

[NOTE 6] The "Jacuzzi Jesus" mentality comes from trying to make Jesus popular by making believing in Him, easy. Jesus didn't do that when He was here on earth. Why are we trying to do it now? When He was here Jesus insisted that a potential disciple not only deny all old familiar ties but also be prepared to suffer horribly because of their identity as His disciple. **Jesus message and call was not easy.** He told the disciples to count the cost. In the world of art, an artist would portray a cross with a ladder propped up against the cross only when he/she wanted to portray Christ's descent from the cross. The ladder was used to take Christ down from the cross, AND that is exactly what the ladder symbol does to our churches today – it removes Christ from the cross and from our discipleship which is complete idiocy! How can you remove Christ from discipleship!

[NOTE 7] Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship, visited a prison in Brazil that was operated by Christians and founded on Christian principles. This is what he found: "When I visited this prison, I found the inmates smiling, particularly the murderer who opened the gates and let me in. Wherever I walked, I saw men at peace. I saw clean living areas, people working hard, the walls were decorated with Biblical sayings from Psalms and Proverbs. My guide escorted me to the notorious prison cell once used for torture. Today, the inmate told me, that area houses only one single inmate. As we reached that cell, he paused and asked, "Are you sure you want to go in?" "Of course," I replied impatiently. "I've been in isolation cells all over the world"

Slowly the guide swung open the massive door and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by inmates – the prisoner Jesus, hanging on a cross. “He’s doing time for the rest of us,” the guide said softly. (pause)

The Gospel shows us in Paul’s words, “a more excellent way,” a way not of health, wealth, and happiness, but of servanthood. Mary found favor, and ended up healthy, wealthy, and happy right? NO, she ended up pregnant and unmarried. If you, ... If I, ...had been the Virgin Mary, how many of us would have said, “No Way!, No thank you, sorry, I don’t do virgin births.”

Mary was the first to realize that to accept the gospel is to enter a radically different way of life. The grace of god takes me “Just As I Am” But the grace of God does not leave us just as we are! It turns our world upside down. The gospel is not the answer ... the gospel is the POWER to become with one another the BODY of CHRIST, where the symbol of success is NOT a golden throne, But a wooden, old, beat up, rugged cross.

“Professionalism” has led us to the point where the central motivating symbol of ministry is the ladder, rather than the cross. Are you clear on that? The ladder symbolized the taking of Jesus off the cross. The cross is acceptance of his death as a ransom for what we owed for our sins. A conversation with a man who had decided to enter the ministry after a successful, 6 figure income career in corporate America illustrates the lethal power resident in the concoction of the careerist-clerical-managerial “ladder” paradigm. “Once I reached the top of the ladder and looked around,” he reflected, “I realized that all the struggle, all the costs to my family and friendships, all the sacrifices I had made to reach the pinnacle were not worth what I found there and the lack of meaning I felt there. Suddenly it hit me: I had propped my ladder up against the wrong building!

The only ladder the Bible knows anything about is Jacob’s ladder. Jacob’s ladder was pitched against the spiritual , not material; ladders should stand in the Garden of Gethsemane and the temple courtyard, not Madison Square Garden and Wall Street. Actually, Jacob had no ladder. He only had a vision and a mission. And he did not climb the ladder anyway; Angels did. When the theme song of a disciple becomes “We are climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” Jesus’ followers become better at climbing ladders --- than lifting crosses. (pause) **[NOTE 8]**

You see, conversion, without immersion in the life of Jesus Christ, is a perversion of the gospel. St. Augustine talked about “the costly grace” of God. Discipleship, servanthood, costs us everything. Everything must go. Genesis 2:25 conveys this powerfully in the image of nakedness: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed.” In the words of theologian Dorothee Soelle: “To be naked means to be without protection; it is to be unarmed. It requires our surrendering the “weapons” that we usually carry around with us. Our credit care, our degree, the things we have accomplished – the whole fortress in which we live – are all “clothes” that we have to get rid of in order to love the way Jesus loved.

To find favor is to be called to disarmament, called to defenselessness, called to discipleship. God does not favor us with ease. God does not favor us with comfort.

Nowhere in the Bible do we find a call to be comfortable! We don't serve a "jacuzzi Jesus," ...as much as we might like that!

There is a sign posted in a African game reserve: "Advance and be bitten." Paul posted the same sign at the entrance to the Christian life. These are his words to the Philippians (1:29): "for unto you it is given on the behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." (KJV) In other words, suffering for the sake of Christ is as much an honor and a blessing as having a personal relationship with Him. The apostles kept that in mind after being beaten, rejoicing that they were "worthy to suffer for His sake." [NOTE 9]

"Who do you say I am?" If your response is "The Messiah! The Son of the Living God," you are one of God's favored ones. But remember this: Your calling as God's favored one does not promise you success. Your calling as God's favored one does not promise you prosperity – or popularity – or a life passed only in pleasure. Your calling as God's favored one only promises you hardship, weariness, suffering, rupture, and—the rapture of "Joy unspeakable and full glory"; the privilege of hearing the music of angel choirs; --the presence of God who "giveth songs in the night"; --the experience of walking barefoot on "holy ground"; the mystery of discovering the encumbering presence of a love as "strong as death" (Song of Solomon 8:6); and ... the thrill of spending your life proclaiming to every human being these old Welsh words from beyond the beckoning starts:

Where'er I go the people say... What's the news? What's the news?
What is the order of the day? What's the news? What's the news?
Oh I have got good news to tell My Savior has done all things well
He triumphed over death and hell. That's the news. That's the news.

That's the good news of the gospel wanting to be born in you—God's terms of endearment quenching St. Anthony's Fire through you. Are you ready to say with Mary: "Let it be, to me, according to Your Word?" Are you ready to say with Jesus: "Not my will, but Your will be done?" Nothing more, Nothing less, Nothing else! Are you ready to pray the greatest prayer ever uttered, this simple but powerful AMEN ... which means "So Be it"? [NOTE 10] The symbol embodying the most fundamental meaning of discipleship is the cross, not the ladder. We glory in the cross of Christ, not the ladder of success, a ladder-kicked away forever when Jesus slipped on the Via Dolorosa.

Remember this: There are no rungs on the cross, only nails. **Let's pray:**

The sooner we come to grips with the fact that to "Take up the cross daily and follow" is not a "feel-good party," Lord, the sooner we will be able to fall into step with the Holy Spirit. Help us to relinquish the driver's seat of our life –Jesus lead on! Never let us forget that you hung unashamed on the cross –Jesus lead on! May your Holy love flow afresh with us as we throw caution to the wind. Lead on Lord! We ask in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ ... AMEN

Sermon Notes for “A Ladder or a Cross” based on Mark 8:27ff
Given at Doster Community Church on September 28, 2025

- I. Picture (OIP) of the Isenheim Altarpiece
- II. Picture (905) of the Isenheim Altarpiece with the wings opened.
- III. “The greater the joy, the greater is the pain which precedes it.” (St. Augustine. Before Jesus could reach the “joy set before Him, Jesus had to pass through the pain of many dark nights and shadowed valleys.
- IV. You, the least, the last, the lost—have been called, like Mary, to give birth to the Christ child, to bring Christ to this earth, to make Jesus come alive to people God puts in your life!
- V. Our culture today wants a “jacuzzi Jesus”. A relationship with a God that will leave them relaxed, warm and bubbly and yet, at the same time, feeling fit and trim when they get out—like they’ve just gotten I shape. But this idea turns Jesus the LOGOS (the Word) and makes him a logo.
- VI. We get “jacuzzi Jesus” because we are trying to make Jesus popular by making believing in Him easy. When Jesus was on earth He didn’t do that!
- VII. The ladder is a symbol of what was used to take Jesus down from the cross. We need to remember that Jesus died on the cross and the only reason that our cross is empty is because He is Risen! (He is risen indeed) We must be people of the cross! Accept that Jesus paid the ransom we owed.
- VIII. The problem with Christianity today is that us Christ-followers have become better at climbing ladders than lifting crosses!!
- IX. IF Jesus is Messiah to you, you calling as God’s favored one does not promise you success. Your calling as god’s favored only promises you hardship, weariness, suffering, rupture, and—the rapture of “Joy unspeakable,” eternal life, the presence of God who “Gives you songs in the night” and the gift of unconditional, unlimited love!
- X. Are you willing to say to Jesus this morning, “Not my will but Your will be done!” “Let it be to me according to your Word!” If you say it, what will be different about you today, this afternoon, this week. Please write something down! What are you going to do about it?