

## Mark 8:27-38 (34-35)

A little boy was at an animal shelter with his dad. He was looking for a puppy to adopt. He came to a cage where a little dog was lying down watching him. "This one," he told his dad, "this is the one I want!" The man in charge of the shelter stepped up and said: "You don't want this puppy. His legs are crippled; he can hardly walk. He'll never be much of a dog. There are other fine puppies here that would make great pets." But the little boy insisted that this dog was the one he wanted. "That's okay that he's crippled and doesn't walk very well," said the boy. Then he pulled up his pants leg and revealed a metal brace. "I don't walk too well either."

If you don't mind me calling you this, you're the puppy Jesus wants. Yes, He is very much aware of that which has crippled you. He knows the troubles that have shaped you--many of which you and I have brought upon ourselves. He knows your weaknesses and shortcomings. He realizes that as far as followers go, you and I don't have the best track record. Oh, there are others out there who have it more together. They have more confidence, more ability. They would make great disciples. But He wants you.

Do you doubt me? Then why do you think He has given you your cross to bear? Why do you think He has allowed you to suffer? Why do you suppose He did not step in and take your cross away from you so that you could follow Him without limping, without any trouble, without any suffering at all?

Jesus does not build His church through strength, but through weakness. He didn't choose the best and brightest back in His day. He chose idiots like Simon Peter who had the gall to rebuke Jesus for insisting that He Himself must suffer and be killed. Oh, He sharply rebuked Peter. But He did not disown him. He didn't tell Peter that he had struck out as His disciple. No, men like Peter, who later would even deny Jesus, and men like James and John who wanted to strike a village in Samaria with fire from heaven, and who wanted seats of glory next to Jesus, and all the rest who argued about being the greatest--these are the ones Jesus chose to be His disciples, and even His apostles; men who were crippled and lame spiritually; men with flaws in their character.

*"If anyone would come after Me," says Jesus, "let him deny himself and take up his cross..."*

There are some who hear these words and see them as a command; as words that tell us what we have to do if we want to be disciples of Jesus. But go back to that puppy with me. It was born crippled. It did not choose to be lame. This burden was laid upon it from birth. And so with us. When you were born into God's family through your baptism in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, the cross was not just made upon your forehead and your heart; God laid a cross upon you to carry throughout your life. This was a cross of suffering, even though that suffering may not have been realized yet by you. You came into God's family as a cripple. He adopted you as His child not because you had so much to offer Him, but because He had so much to give you.

So often we have Simon Peter's mind and heart. We want God to build His church with might and strength. We want Jesus to take charge of our lives, take charge of our enemies in a commanding manner. Peter was repulsed by the words Jesus was speaking. No Lord of his was

going to suffer and be killed. His Lord would conquer. His Lord would win with power. Peter refused to see the metal brace on Jesus' legs, and he refused to admit that he himself was a cripple. He wanted no cross of his own, and he wanted no cross for Jesus.

But that's not what it means to be a Christian. Take away your cross, and you take Christ away. The Christian life is not lived out in glory and honor, but under the shadow of the cross. Jesus, our Head, chose for Himself suffering, shame, dishonor. He chose the cross for Himself. And where our Head goes, we, His body, will follow. Peter did not want his Lord to go the way of the cross because he knew that would be the path he, too, must take. He was not ready, at that time in his life, for that path. He showed this most clearly by denying that he was a disciple of Jesus in the face of fear.

What about you? It goes against our nature to embrace suffering. We complain when even the tiniest troubles disrupt our day. Yet Jesus tells us that we follow Him not by avoiding the cross, but by carrying it.

In Christ, God picked up the cross; a cross He bore for you. In Christ, God denied Himself to live out His life for you, and to die a bloody death for you. Jesus carried His cross throughout His life, and He carried it in a most painful way toward Calvary. He carried it in shame before the eyes of the world. He carried it not with strength, but with legs that limped along the way.

Do you think you will carry your cross without limping? Do you think you will suffer without tears? That you will follow Christ without struggles? That's not what He asks of you. Friend, Jesus does not leave you to carry your cross alone. He lives in you. He helps you in your sufferings. He sheds tears with you. And then He dries your tears with His words of comfort. He is the strength within you when you are weak. He knows something about carrying crosses. He knows about denying oneself. And He also knows that Easter follows Lent. His cross blossomed with life in His resurrection. And so will yours.

Do not ever think that Jesus will forsake you because you have not carried your cross well in the past. He keeps His cross before you. "I suffered for you," He tells you again and again, "I forgive you." Your failures of the past are forgiven. Your sins are washed away, not because you carry your cross, but because He bore His cross for you. He will help you endure. Jesus will see you through your Lenten sufferings in this life and bring you to that great Easter celebration. In heaven your cross will be gone. In heaven your sufferings will be turned to joy.

Now we follow Christ with our cross. Now we suffer. But we know what is coming. And so we keep walking with Jesus. We keep struggling with patience. Crippled and lame though we are, you have a Savior who loves you and who forgives you, and who will see you through to the end. Amen.