TWO CROSSES!

1. The cross Jesus carried for us
2. The cross Jesus has us carry for him

Let me start out today with a question. What kind of Christianity are you looking for? These words from Matthew’s Gospel compel us to ask such a question. I am not talking about Catholic or Baptist or ELCA or LCMS or even WELS. What kind of Christianity are you looking for in your life - a Christianity of the cross or a Christianity of the couch? Sadly, Christianity of the couch sells pretty well these days. I remember watching a TV evangelist who invited me to pray with him (and I quote) to name and claim great success for myself! That is comfortable – it is a religion of the couch, not the cross.

I once had a member who so wanted to please his fiancée he agreed to take membership classes at her church, but when he asked her pastor what that church believed about heaven and hell, that pastor told him: That’s much too controversial a subject to discuss with you. That is comfortable – it is a religion of the couch, not the cross. Many churches today have minimal doctrinal standards. They have done away with crosses and altars because they say such things scare away modern people. Instead of worship with a confession of sins, Law-Gospel sermons, and Holy Communion, they will have what they call big celebrations with cotton candy messages and plenty of feel-good music. That is comfortable; that is the couch, not the cross.

Jesus will have nothing to do with this religion of the couch. He will not pander to a system of faith which appeals to sinful appetites, but what Jesus will do is dish up for Peter, for me and for you a religion that meets our deepest needs – the need for forgiveness, the peace of knowing we are all right with the Almighty God, the certainty of where we will be when we die. That is the religion of the cross. So let’s listen carefully as Jesus speaks about: TWO CROSSES! The cross Jesus carried for us and the cross Jesus has us carry for him.

Our reading starts: From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. For almost three years Jesus had preached to and taught the masses hoping to gather to himself a harvest of fellow Jews, but in the end, precious few trusted in him. That is because Jesus was not interested in giving them the faith of the couch - booting out those Romans and ushering in a golden age for Israel. So here at the end of his ministry, Jesus narrows his focus to the Twelve. He tells them he must go to Jerusalem. He must be killed and rise again. Jesus tells them this because they must be made proclaimers of this cross, not peddlers of comfortable religious couches.

What is stunning here is our Lord’s sense of timing. Just before these words, just last Sunday we heard Jesus ask his disciples: Who do people say the Son of Man is? Then he zeroed in on them: But who do you say I am? That is when Peter came up with his Spirit-inspired answer: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!

Then immediately after this wonderful confession Jesus tells them this Son must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. It sounds so matter-of fact as it rolls off his lips and you wonder if we even hear what is being said. Listen again: He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things - he must be killed and the third day be raised to life. So matter of fact? My friends, this is anything but matter-of-fact!

Jesus knew everything that was going to happen to him – the slaps, spitting, whipping, thorns and nails - every horror of that cross waiting for him. There was no couch in Jerusalem for Jesus! But Jesus went there for you, for me, for a world of sinners. That is why that cross is so important - that cross we hang on our walls at home, that cross we hang around our necks, that cross we hang in our church - that cross we sing about in so many of hymns like, Lift High The
Cross!

Paul tells us: The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Now there is a mouthful! The power of God! Paul writes. Did you know from that Greek word we get our English word dynamite? That is what the cross of Christ is - the dynamite of God!

Scripture teaches we were all born with this nasty, little stony heart - a heart inclined only to do, say and think wicked things - a hostile heart that can only shake a fist at the Lord. But through the miracle of Baptism with the good news of his cross and forgiveness, the Lord blew up that stony, wicked, hostile heart and then gave you and me a new one - a heart that now beats with saving faith in him as our Savior!

There, my friends, is the dynamite of God! When we hear about the Lord's power, we sometimes wish he's flex those almighty muscles a little more with our personal problems in life so that they would all disappear in the bat of an eyelash, so we would have a little heaven here on earth.

That is exactly what Jesus did not do. Instead he showed his saving power to us in weakness. The One with all authority in heaven and earth lies in a manger cooing as he looks up at the very stars he created! The One, our Psalm says neither slumbers nor sleeps, worked himself to the point of exhaustion! The holy One is executed like a death row convict by heathen soldiers! The One who fills the whole universe filled a cold grave for three days!

Yet that is anything but weakness! That is the dynamite of God! You see, this Jesus who says he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and then must be killed, is the same Jesus who rose from death and lives forever! That means the sin I have trouble admitting, the guilt I try to hide, the blame I ignore for all the evil I do and all the good I leave undone, the punishment of hell I try to avoid thinking about, all this Jesus took away from me and from you when he put himself on a cross.

Now when Satan tempts us to think our sins are too many and too terrible to be forgiven or that no God could love us after all the times we have forsaken him, Jesus’ cross towers over the wrecks of time, proclaiming the eternal love he will always have for us sinners Why, by that cross the very gates of heaven are now opened up wide to you and me! This first cross in our lives - Jesus’ cross - is so beautiful, isn’t it?

But as soon as we grab onto to that first cross in faith, then comes the second one. The first cross is so beautiful to hear about, but the second cross sure is a tough one to bear! It is the cross we carry in life. This cross is not just any pain or any disappointment, which comes to anybody, Christian or not. This cross is whatever we must suffer for being a Christian, whatever we could easily step around by not following Jesus, whatever we must give up for him.

Our text says: Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never Lord! he said. This shall never happen to you! He just made a wonderful confession in Jesus the Christ. Now Peter turns around and deliberately reached for the religion of the couch. Matthew says: Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Those Greek verbs describe a finger-in-your face-talking-to! Lord, this shall never happen to you! You see, life was comfy for Peter. Exciting miracles, serious diseases healed, violent storms calmed, free lunches for 5000+ hungry people! Peter is a Jesus’ groupie, if you will. He does not want it to end. There must be another way. That is the religion of the couch!

Jesus turned and said to Peter: Out of my sight Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. Wow! Isn’t Jesus overdoing it just a bit here? No! Peter was being a temptation to Jesus to deviate from God the Father’s saving plan. When Peter tells Jesus there should never be a cross of Calvary, he was really asking for his own damnation in hell as well as ours! Satan got him to forget what a serious matter his own personal sins were.

Does Satan ever do that to us? I just can’t be so bad God’s Son must suffer and die so
shamefully for me! But it has to be the cross, not the couch! So Jesus said to Peter: Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.

My friends, your Lord Jesus now says to you: If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

In other words, be ready! Be ready to carry Cross #2 in your life. If the enemies of Christ then crowned his head with thorns and nailed him to a cross, the enemies of Christ today are not going to crown our heads with roses and make life comfy when we won’t be quiet and go along with the crowd’s sinful activities. And if Christ was the butt of every Roman soldier’s joke on Good Friday, don’t think for a second our Christian faith is not going to be the butt of this ungodly world’s mockery every time we stand up for Jesus!

But all this is really a blessing because as you and I carry those crosses for Jesus in life, they are ever-present reminders that I’m but a stranger here and that heaven is my home! Those crosses keep you and me from becoming like the rich man Jesus once told us about the ultimate couch potato with his bumper crops, his bigger barns and his foolish life-plan to eat, drink, and be merry. The problem was he died that night. Then he stepped into all eternity, not with Christ’s cross, but with his religion of the couch.

Jesus asks us to make this appraisal: What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? Quite an appraisal of human life, wouldn’t you say? Those weekends without worship and those days without Bible reading, would they be so precious that it is worth endangering our immortal souls? Our lifestyles, our pet sins, our stubborn insistence on having it our way, are they so precious that we would give up heaven to keep them? Jesus reminds us: What will a man give in exchange for his soul? What can we give? Not all of the world’s gold could pay for our sins. Not a trillion of this world’s treasures and pleasures could keep us out of hell. Only Jesus can give his life on a cross in exchange for our souls!

Still the second cross that comes after grabbing on in faith to Jesus’ cross is tough! Taking stands as Christians is no easy task in a world that disagrees more and more with God’s Word. But when we sinners play it safe because we are scared of what others may think of us, when we sinners find ourselves ashamed to speak his W, when carrying whatever cross he has assigned us seems too great a burden, we must look again at that other cross - Jesus’ cross! There is our forgiveness! There is our strength!

My friends, thank the Lord and love the crosses he has put into your life! By Jesus’ cross you have been bought into the family of heaven - forever a saved child of God! Gladly carry that second cross because it truly is a badge of honor for all who love the Lord Jesus. And as you carry it, don’t forget to lift it high as you proclaim his saving name. Amen.

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