

THE COMFORTABLE PEW
First in a sermon series on “Spiritual Leadership” based upon the book of the same title.
Mark 8: 27-38 – Communion Sunday – January 2, 2011
The Church of the Covenant

We are very territorial where our pews are concerned. I think this is both because it is very human to stake out a particular place and camp out there; it feels regular and homey and, dare I say it, “comfortable”. We know what to expect when sitting in our comfortable pew; our perspective quite literally remains always the same. It also probably goes back to the era when pews were “rented”. Church members literally paid an annual fee for their pew. Perhaps let’s rent parking spaces closest to the door today. In those days the pews up front cost the most; these days I think the pews closest to the door would be costliest, as in, “Let’s keep the car running in the parking lot, dear, so we can make it to the Steeler’s game first!”

But I ask this question today –*How comfortable should our pew really be?* Is Christianity about comfort or something else? The old dictum that has been around for years perhaps applies – the preacher is to comfort the troubled and trouble the comfortable. Are we about “comfortable Christianity” or about something more? This begins a multi-part sermon series on “Spiritual Leadership” and is based upon Henry and Richard Blackaby’s book of the same title. What does it mean to follow the Lord Jesus Christ with our life? What does it mean to exercise spiritual leadership? Where are we doing it well today...and where do we need to feel a little uncomfortable in order to do a better job of it?

Our text for today’s New Year’s communion is one of the greatest texts in all of scripture, where our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, places His own ministry in a nutshell, and says in a nutshell what our ministry is to be. I will tell you this –it is an “uncomfortable” scripture in its challenge to us today. No matter how much one does for the Lord, it will convict and challenge and discomfort whatever comfortable laurel we wish to rest upon. The text is this –*“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mark 8: 34)* The scripture passage we just read from the gospel of Mark begins with Peter’s great confession of faith –He says of Jesus, *“You are the Christ.” (Mark 8: 29)* But as wonderful as this confession of faith is Jesus goes on to confront His friend and disciple by saying to Peter, in effect, “No, its not just about believing and making a right confession. No, Peter, if you would come after me, you have to DENY SELF and TAKE UP YOUR CROSS in order to FOLLOW ME.” The comfortable pew thinks that Christianity is just about abstract belief in the Lord Jesus; but true, UN-comfortable Christianity knows that in order to follow Jesus we have to walk where Jesus walked. We like the idea of Jesus as Savior; we believe in Him and so are saved. We like far less the fact that when we are indeed really saved we will follow HIM daily as LORD and so deny self and pick up His cross in order to follow Him. We may believe Him to be Savior but the real question is if we follow Him as Lord! And if He’s not our Lord then He isn’t our Savior either. If that doesn’t make us feel a little uncomfortable, I don’t know what will.

Jesus says, *“If any man would come after me”...FIRST, “let him deny self”. (v. 34)* First DENY SELF. Too much of what masquerades for Christianity today is very “me-centered”; its about what I WANT; its about “the church meeting my spiritual needs”; its about the church “taking care of me”; its about “feel good religion”. There’s a therapeutic version of Christianity out there that somehow suggests its like a nice therapy session; come to church just to feel a little better about yourself, go home unchanged, not transformed and certainly unchallenged. No, spiritual leadership means you will *never* get exactly what you want because you are so focused upon what God wants and what others need that your own self becomes denied. Self-centered IS America today; God-centered is what America needs to be. The

higher one moves up the “food chain” of leadership in the church the LESS one gets exactly the way one wants it. Indeed, spiritual leadership in its denial of self switches over the normal, human desire and ego satisfaction into the very opposite –I am a spiritual leader when I am doing what God and others want, not what I want. “Thy will, Lord, not my will be done.”

Jesus says, “*If any man would come after me*”...FIRST, “*let him deny self*” and then SECOND “*take up his cross*”. Second, PICK UP YOUR CROSS. The cross Jesus picked up wasn’t pretty and it wasn’t nice and it wasn’t comfortable and it wasn’t therapeutic and it wasn’t about Him, it wasn’t FOR Him; it was about US and it was for US. Sometimes people say, “Oh, my malady is the cross I bear”. Or “the difficulties in life are the cross I bear”. No, no, that’s still about you. The cross by its very definition was bourn for someone else; Jesus didn’t bear the cross for Himself He bore it for us. Cross bearing is doing something self-sacrificial for someone else. When we take up the cross we’re bearing someone else’s burden, not our own. There is a giant statue of Jesus hanging on the cross in the Commons area. Every one of us had to walk by the cross in order to get into the sanctuary today. How many people actually saw it? I know, because I walk in and out of the Commons area many times almost every day and I become almost jaded and calloused where it is concerned; it has almost become “comfortable” and expected and normal; I shut it out of my mind in my hurry to do other things I deem to be “more important”. We’re reminded every Sunday by that sculpture to “take up our cross” but its easier to dash to our comfortable pew and not look up and see exactly what Jesus means when He tells us that in order to “come after Him” we have to “take up His cross”. The sculpture is titled “Sacrifice” and self-sacrifice and taking up the cross of others for their sake is the very definition of being a spiritual leader and a disciple.

Jesus says, “*If any man would come after me*”...FIRST, “*let him deny self*” and then SECOND “*take up his cross*” and then THIRD “*follow me*”. Third, Jesus says, FOLLOW ME. Once we’ve resolved to deny self and that Christianity has nothing to do with me and once we’re actually made the commitment to pick up a cross of self-sacrifice as the expression of our spiritual leadership, then and only then does Jesus say, “*FOLLOW ME*” (v. 34) If one tries to be a spiritual leader on one’s own we aren’t going to get very far. The first time you don’t get what you want in the church you’ll get frustrated and fall away. We do what God wants us to do when we “follow Jesus”. We discern the will of God for us when we seek to discern where the footsteps of Jesus are leading us. We understand why God has called us all to be spiritual leaders and the part we are to play in the church and in our family and in our community and in our world when we pray and seek God’s will for our life and seek only to follow HIM. And where did the footsteps of Jesus lead? To a comfortable pew? To feeling good about Himself? To getting a little dose of religion only to go home unchanged and unchallenged? No, beloved, the footsteps of Jesus took Him to Calvary, to the ultimate denial of self, to the ultimate servanthood on behalf of others, to the cross. See, beloved, following Jesus never leads us to the comfortable pew...it always leads us to the cross... that’s how we know we’re following HIM...

Examples of spiritual leadership and cross-bearing abound at The Church of the Covenant –this fall the 50th Anniversary Committee spent HUGE amounts of time, were often here late into the evening, spent time and energy and money on behalf of a celebration for us. Operating the dish washer at 10:00 p.m. after a long day is spiritual leadership and bearing the cross for others. We just hosted the Interfaith Hospitality Network here in our church, a lot of work and commitment, a lot of love for some homeless families. Sleeping on a cot in a Sunday School classroom in order to host some homeless families that you never even met before that week is spiritual leadership Jesus-style. Hosting a concert for hundreds of people who are not members of the church but who are drawn a little closer to Jesus and spending hours and hours of time promoting it and setting it up and taking it down late at night, where you’re so dog-tired you can hardly move that’s spiritual leadership. I could go on and on. We are blessed with

gifted, committed, cross-bearing spiritual leaders who seek to follow Jesus with their lives...Don't sit in the pew and criticize...Be like them and indeed you'll follow Jesus...

I once served a church where when people were asked to sit down in worship they would be told, "Please be comfortable." I don't know where that came from and why it was said but I was sure it had been around for a long time. It always bothered me. For the life of me sometimes I wanted to say – "Please be *uncomfortable*". Stand on the promises; don't be seated around the premises. But I didn't. Maybe instead of saying, "Please be comfortable" I would rather point to the cross and say, "No, please be like Jesus." Because "spiritual leadership" is following HIM.

The comfortable pew or the uncomfortable cross? "Jesus says, *"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself...take up his cross...and follow me..."*

Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*