

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED:
Luke 23:26-28
THEY FOLLOWED HIM TO CALVARY

Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after Jesus. And a great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who also mourned and lamented Him. But Jesus, turning to them, said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

Remember playing follow the leader?—just for fun, a game--go where the person in front of you goes. Ever follow the crowd? Do what other people do, so as not to be different. Or whatever opinion other people have, you take the same; the crowd must be right. If the Pied Piper plays his tune, do you follow to your own ruin? But then again, sheep follow the shepherd and the voice of the shepherd--for their own safety and welfare.

In this evening's text we see various people following Jesus as He is led from Pilate's Praetorium to Golgotha for execution. "They led Him away," Luke says. Jesus has certainly been led around a lot during the last six hours or so, from His arrest in Gethsemane to Annas the high priest (rightful high priest, as we assume), then from Annas to Caiaphas (the Roman appointed high priest, we assume), from Caiaphas and the entire Jewish Sanhedrin to Pontius Pilate the Roman governor, from Pilate to Herod the neighboring Roman governor, from Herod back to Pilate, and now from Pilate to the hill called Golgotha or Calvary, translated The Skull. Isaiah the Old Testament prophet was exactly right when he wrote concerning the suffering Messiah, *He was led as a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7)*. Jesus being treated as so much baggage, shuffled from one place to another, until He reached the cross. Such indignity for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! He came to suffer humbly for you and for me, to take the dregs of treatment—for our sins. He had none.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus was made to carry His own cross. Such disdainful treatment, like asking a criminal to carry the ammunition with which he will be shot, or ordering a child to get a switch with which he will be swatted. But according to this text from Luke and the accounts of Matthew and Mark, a man named Simon from the city of Cyrene became involved in the death march. Evidently Jesus was exhausted to the point that he could not carry the cross any further. After the physical abuse He had taken, it's no wonder. Simon, a man with a Jewish name, and thus likely a Jew, was nabbed to help. Cyrene was located on the north coast of Africa along the Mediterranean Sea. It was about five or six hundred miles west of Egypt's Nile River. It was opposite Greece which was on the north side of the Mediterranean. It was in fact a Greek settlement, but many Jews lived there, as was true of the Greek city Alexandria in Egypt.

The Roman soldiers *laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country*. They seized Simon on his way into Jerusalem. Likely he was coming for the remaining days of Passover week. Maybe the soldiers picked purely at random, or maybe Simon by appearance was big and strong. But they forcefully interrupted his plans for the day and compelled him to carry the cross. Maybe Simon thought, "What rotten luck! If I'd have been 20 minutes earlier or 20 minutes later I wouldn't be stuck like this. I should have taken a different road/street/path into town. Now I'm going to get dirty, now I'm going to get sweaty, now I'm, going to be humiliated and associated with this criminal as part of the execution entourage." It doesn't seem as if Simon had any prior connection to Jesus as friend or foe, but maybe he did. At any rate, what begins as a tremendous dishonor for him, in retrospect would become a privilege and honor. To assist the Savior in carrying His cross.

The Lord gives such "reverse privileges" to us too--opportunities that spring out of reversals. Because you got stalled on the road, you met someone with whom you were able to discuss the peace of heart that you have in Jesus. Maybe you never see the person again, but what a blessed opportunity. Or do you ever think that it would have been so much better if you had lived 100 years ago, because then the Christians didn't stick out like such a sore thumb in society. I don't know if that was necessarily true. I am surprised to read at times sermons from a hundred years ago or more, and hear how much opposition there was to the pure Gospel—forgiveness and salvation by faith through God's gift in Christ. There is no such thing as rotten luck in God's Kingdom, or luck of any kind for that matter. The Father weaves all things together for the salvation of souls by faith in His Son.

We do assume Simon became a Christian, if not prior at least some time after carrying Jesus' cross. Mark tells us that this Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus—as if those men were familiar to his readers. Also in Paul's letter to the congregation in Rome, he mentions a believer named Rufus—perhaps this same son of Simon.

Follow Jesus with joy and honor in your hearts, not just because you are, or were, compelled to by your parents or spouse or pastor. I served a repentant man in prison in Wisconsin who admitted how he had chafed under the Christian education he received at Messiah in Eau Claire and at ILC for two years, and thereafter ran his own way to the point of prison. He looked back with fondness on those precious truths He had learned, that in Jesus, he had the Father's mercy and forgiveness. Following Jesus is your honor!

Our text also tells us that *a great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who also mourned and lamented Him*. Simon of Cyrene wasn't the only one following in the crucifixion train that day—a great multitude followed. Surely some seething with hatred and glee to see this happen, others simply out of curiosity (would some of you show up downtown if there were to be a legal hanging tomorrow?). Perhaps others merely got drawn along with the crowd, as easily happens—everybody else is going. And some followed in grief and sorrow and sympathy.

There were wailing-women who mourned and lamented Him, who smote their hearts in grief, and cried in sorrow at the unfolding tragedy. But Jesus was not pleased with their actions. It was all for show. Do you remember Mark's account of the raising of Jairus' 12 year old daughter? *When Jesus reached the home He saw a tumult and those who wept and wailed loudly. He said to them, "Why make this commotion and weep?"* (Mark 5:38-39). There were mourners and wailers who grieved loudly, not from the sorrow of their hearts, but just for part of the display. Jesus corrected their misguided zeal. Don't just go through this show of grief for me. *"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. I am dying on the cross because of you and the sins of your people and the sins of the world. Weep tears of repentance for yourselves and your children. Without sorrow for sin and clinging to God's mercy in me, you will face destruction. Then you will have something to weep about. Weep about God's wrath to come for unbelief. That's the real tragedy, that I am here, and have come, but hearts stubbornly and proudly turn away.*

Do you follow Jesus this Lenten season, just because it's the touching thing to do? Because it's so sad for Him and such a tragedy that they treated Him like that? It was sad, but follow Him for yourself. He is your desperately needed Savior. In Luke 13, Jesus also talked about true tragedy. Real tragedy was not that Pilate had killed some Jews and crudely mixed their blood with the blood of the sacrifices they had just taken to the temple. Horrid! Real tragedy was not the fact the tower in Siloam fell upon 18 citizens and crushed them to death. Real tragedy is the death of unrepentant sinners. So here, *"Daughters do not weep for me, but weep for your unrepentant selves and your unrepentant people."* Follow Jesus, not just for the sake of the display, but for what you are given in Him.

Jesus would continue His walk to Calvary and there offer Himself for the sins of the world. The Bible tells us nothing more about His trip from Pilate's Praetorium to The Place of the Skull. There are many stories that have come to be told about this path of sorrows, or the Via Dolorosa, as it is called. None of those accounts, as pious or appealing as they may be, are from Scripture.

Here we see Jesus, ever the Friend, ever the Teacher, ever the Shepherd, giving opportunity to Simon of Cyrene and to these women to be drawn closer to Him for the real reason, for their eternal forgiveness and welfare through His blood. In Him you too are washed clean, as unfit as you are in thought, word, and deed. You are pronounced clean and holy! He who died and rose again gives life to you. Life and God's-favor-in-Christ! Such a Savior! Such a gift! He calls you to faith by His Love and His Word. Follow Him from your heart.

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach----