

Crossroads

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Matthew 16:24.

Over the years, I’ve had several chances to take road trips. Family vacations to Florida with my parents and brother. Trips to and from college in Nebraska. More recently, trips out to Kansas to visit family. And with all those trips I think one thing that sticks with me is crossing the state boundary lines and seeing the welcome sign for the state you’re entering.

Seeing those signs certainly is a sign of progress. The trip is moving along, and the destination is getting closer. Even the design of the signs is somewhat intriguing as each one highlights a unique aspect of that state. Georgia has the peach. Florida is the “Sunshine State”. Nebraska mentions Arbor Day. Kansas has a sunflower. And Indiana has the motto, the “Crossroads of America”.

While this motto might be, for some, a positive spin on what others would label a pass-through, or fly-over, state, it really is interesting to consider the amount of traffic and travel little old Indiana experiences. Both by plane and car or truck, Indiana is a hub for transportation making it’s way around the United States and even the world. From airports to interstates (I-65, I-69, I-70, I-80, to name some), there are lots of crossroads for this state.

Now, the challenging part to these crossroads is how they impact travel time. I’d imagine that this is a familiar experience for many. You’re humming along the highway only to be slowed down, not by an accident or construction, simply the merging of so much traffic at one crossroad. And it’s these traffic slowdowns where it’s hard to know whether a detour is better. Things should pick up on their own but it’s hard to keep following along at such a slow pace.

Crossroads aren’t only a physical thing. They’re a spiritual thing too. Honestly, every time we pass by churches, these buildings stand as signs for the reality of the spiritual crossroads of this life. While they may not have a peach or a sunflower on them, most of them do have a common symbol of life’s spiritual crossroads and that is the cross. And truly, whether it’s on the steeple or the sign, the cross isn’t only a *picture* of the spiritual crossroads in this life, it is, literally, the spiritual crossroad in this life.

This weekend’s Gospel reading makes this clear when, **“... Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”** (Matthew 16:24) This was Jesus’ broader statement to the whole group based on what had just taken place with Peter. Via Peter, they all had been brought to the major crossroad between the things of God and the things of man.

Things had been humming along for Jesus and His disciples. Jesus had been teaching and healing in miraculous ways. Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ seemed to show some growth and understanding for the disciples. But suddenly things changed. This same man, Peter, whom Jesus had called blessed now was associated with Satan himself. Peter had moved into the crossroad of what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ and wanted to avoid the slowdown by taking a detour he thought was better.

“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’” (Matthew 16:21-23)

Like with so many detours with physical crossroads, Peter’s detour with this spiritual crossroad may have been well intended but it was the wrong option. What Peter and the other disciples had to learn from Jesus was that being the Christ, the Messiah, the One promised by God to save and redeem His people meant enduring the cross not avoiding it. While this was hard to understand for Peter and the other disciples at that moment, this was how Jesus truly came to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life for them and all people.

Eventually, Peter got this message. Years after all that Jesus shared came true, Peter wrote a letter to Christians in need of encouragement to continue to live faithfully under difficult authority. He wrote applying to them the very thing Jesus taught him that following Jesus meant enduring the cross. **“Servants,**

be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.” (1 Peter 2:19-20)

These words certainly reveal Peter’s change in understanding spiritual crossroads pursuing the things of God over the things of man. Yet, it’s what comes next that clearly shows Peter’s fuller understanding of Jesus’ suffering and death which had escaped him in our Gospel reading this weekend:

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example. So that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:21-24)

Peter no longer was taking detours around what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ. Instead, by God’s mercy and grace, Peter clung to and proclaimed Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection as the necessary path of restoration for all sinners. And from this necessary path that Jesus endured, Peter recognized what that meant for himself and all followers of Jesus. They, too, were called to take up their cross as they followed their Savior, Jesus.

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) Welcome to our spiritual crossroad. It’s a crossroad that we face daily and daily, whether we realize it or not, we look for detours around this crossroad. Consistently, we take the routes of the “things of man” instead of staying the course with the “things of God”. Our priorities and values veer off after God-given gifts instead of the Giver Himself. Our relationships speed toward sinful, selfish pleasure and ease away from the call and commitment God desires. Our identities race down alternate paths that feel like progress away from the identity God has given us. And each and every detour we take ultimately leads us further into Satan’s grasp and further away from the Savior’s forgiving embrace made possible by His suffering, death, and resurrection.

Like Peter and like the people to whom Peter addressed his letter, we need to be rerouted. We can’t continue going on our detours thinking we’ll eventually get back on course. We’re not capable of turning things around ourselves. We’re not going to accidentally figure out that our detours aren’t helpful. Our Savior must warn us of the danger we’re pursuing and when we realize how lost we are, He’s right there willing to bring us back to Him, the path of righteousness, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Yes, we have strayed, but our Savior by His words of rebuke and forgiveness returns us to the route He has laid out for us.

Yes, rerouting is a daily thing because we daily experience the spiritual crossroad of the cross. Rerouting doesn’t mean ignoring or avoiding the cross. Rerouting means repentance and regularly returning to the cross. Rerouting doesn’t mean pursuing the things of man but clinging to the things of God. Rerouting is rooted in God’s Word and in His gifts. Not simply as a church thing on the weekend, but an everyday necessity. We receive God’s words here, at home, in the car, at school, at work, in the morning, in the afternoon, at night, everywhere. We remember our baptism as we speak God’s Triune name and encounter water. As we eat, we give thanks that our God and Savior who regularly nourishes our bodies also regularly nourishes our souls with His body and blood.

So, this weekend and throughout this week, as you come to spiritual crossroads may God give you the strength to resist the temptation to take the detours of the things of man. May God give you a heart of repentance to recognize the detours that you wandered down trying to avoid the cross. And by His mercy and grace may He reroute you to Himself and His work upon the cross the Way, the Truth, and the Life for you. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan