

Grace Lutheran Church
The Rev. P. Stevens Lynn – Sermon
Sunday, February 25, 2018
Second Sunday in lent – Mark 8: 31-38

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ
Amen.*

In my 64 years of life, I have had numerous pets – dogs and cats, as part of our family. In terms of appetite and eating, there are two kinds of pets. Those that will eat everything and anything you put in their bowls, whether it be meat or mushrooms; throw it in their bowl and they'll scarf it down like it's their last meal. (I had a beagle that would eat Styrofoam if you put it in his bowl.) Then there are those pets that approach every tidbit offered with suspicion. They stop, they look around, they sniff and then finally tentatively they nibble the food given them. This fussy dog attitude (it happens with dogs and cats – but I'll call it dog) – this fussy dog attitude is like this: “Okay, I'll do you a favor, and I'll eat this stuff.” The scarf hounds joyously wolf down whatever comes their way, because they trust that whatever you give them is something they want and need. Fussy dogs grace us with their presence – and do us a favor by eating what is in their bowls.

How did you come to worship today? As a scarf hound or a fussy dog? Am I here because my soul trusts in God's blessings to me and hungers for the gift of being able to draw near to Jesus and thank him, and then go out and serve? And to come and be in community with our Grace family? Or am I here because I am gracing God with my presence and doing God and everyone else a favor by showing up? Do you sometimes think that God needs your presence to be complete?

In this week's Gospel lesson, Peter once again demonstrated his ability to get everything right in one moment and then in the next breath to get everything wrong. In verse 29, two verses before our lesson today starts, Peter boldly and correctly stated to Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” and then a moment later, Peter rebuked Jesus because Jesus described the sacrificial nature of what being the Messiah was all about. Peter somehow thought, that all Jesus wanted was an affirmation of his own identity, or in other words, Jesus somehow needed Peter to say good things about him – to affirm his unique status and power – when in reality Peter is the one who needed the man he hitched his

wagon to – to have that status and power. When Jesus described how being the Messiah meant suffering and death, Peter took offense. That wasn't what Peter signed up for. Peter spat out Jesus' message of the suffering Messiah who would be tortured and executed just as a fussy dog would spit out some food that wasn't quite "good enough." So here is where you hear those iconic words "Get behind me, Satan." Peter thought that confessing Jesus as Messiah was what Jesus wanted. He was half right; but what Jesus really wanted was a discipleship of sacrifice and service, that engine was love, not power, or status, or control, but love – freely offered and given to all people. Jesus' rebuke of Peter's fussy dog response led to an even more shocking demand – for Jesus said: "If anyone wants to follow me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." Deny self, act selflessly, voluntarily place yourself in the background – not easy for many of us.

True discipleship is the worship of God's presence and thankfulness for God's blessings. Over all my years as a worshiper, I have come to believe that true worship takes our attention off ourselves and directs it to Jesus – and what does Jesus do with our attention – he directs it straight to our neighbor. Jesus' concept of being the Messiah meant "to take up his cross for us." And as his followers, it means we, too, choose that lifestyle of giving ourselves away for our neighbor – those people we find around us each day and those people who we don't know who suffer injustices. God really doesn't need our wealth or any gift from us. God gives us the gift of salvation and love and forgiveness. All that God desires, in response, is for us to acknowledge the gift, to embrace Jesus as Messiah, and to have as Pastor Louder always says, "an attitude of gratitude" to God for God's blessings. From that attitude of gratitude springs our faith works – our faith works of worship and giving ourselves away for the sake of our neighbor.

Our worship is where we approach Jesus with love and humility. On Sunday mornings, we do no favor to God by showing up here – sort of like the fussy dog. But we come here to be drawn closer to Jesus our source of love and life; and we come here to be in community with each other – our church family. In the letter I sent to you – some of you received it yesterday – some of you will get it tomorrow. When you read it, you'll know that I want you to worship more faithfully – but not because God needs it – but because you do; and I want you to financially give more generously, as you can, not because God needs your money, but because Jesus' church does, and so that we, here at Grace, can do all the ministries we now do and new ones that need done. Let's do our responses to God, as a "hungry dog" – and not as a "fussy one." Jesus shook off Peter's "fussy dog" attitude and instead challenged him, and all of us, to allow worship to help give us

the proper orientation and focus for life – which is: Acknowledge God’s love for us, acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, hunger for God’s presence and then spend the rest of the week thanking Jesus for his love and blessings; and then humbly giving ourselves away by caring for those around us. Worship, what we do here – is adoring and acknowledging the reality of God’s presence with us – being hungry for it. That’s why we show up – to acknowledge and give thanks and then to soak up all we can.

It’s worship that empowers and enables Jesus’ way of ministry and mission in our lives. Worship is never an end in and of itself. As good as we can make it, with our liturgy and music and sermon – and we should strive for excellence – because we do it for Jesus – but worship is always the beginning – never the end – but the spring board that propels us into the week to live Jesus’ way. And Jesus’ way is to take up the cross, to deny self, to give ourselves away for others. And that’s what so unsettled Peter, so much so that he spit it out like a fussy dog does with food that’s not good enough. But that’s Jesus’ way – to give yourself away. How you do that is between you and your gift package and your blessings and Jesus. It may mean – move out of your comfort zone and try some new ministry – get involved in ways you’ve never done before, or if you are financially blessed with enough, give more, so we can do more ministry for Jesus.

Whatever it means for you to take up your cross – to choose to do something for another, that’s doing mission and ministry the way Jesus did. And the strength to do that all starts with worship, where are drawn in to Jesus’ presence. Worship helps you see and feel Jesus’ love and forgiveness and strength – Worship helps you to take in his presence, not as a fussy dog but as a hungry one – and that gives you strength to serve. Jesus gathers us in, Jesus feeds us while here, then he sends us out to spend ourselves in ministry. That’s the ticket for discipleship. Isn’t it so?

Amen.