

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church
Youth Sunday ~ March 4, 2012
Mr. Clayton Willis
Mark 8:31-38

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen

Jesus has put his disciples and all of us in quite a pickle. First of all, he is telling the disciples how he is going to die and expects everyone to accept that. Peter seems to take the news a little hard. Peter takes Jesus off to the side and basically says "No that won't happen you are Christ!" Jesus then yells at Peter for being focused on worldly desires and compares him to Satan. Jesus then gives us a decision to make. He turns to the crowd and says "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Jesus is not making a general statement here. This is not Him SUGGESTING that we take up this COLLECTIVE cross and walk behind Him. Jesus is talking to each individual. YOU must take up YOUR cross and truly follow him.

Many say that taking up the cross is stomaching your difficulties, enduring your pain, putting your problems on your back and simply moving forward. I believe it is much more than that. It is not necessarily a burden, but more of a decision. The decision to pick up your cross truly made you who you are today. It was probably one of the hardest decisions in your life. Ridicule, not being the most popular, or even getting avoided by some could be apart of the decision to pick up your cross.

My cross is right here (indicating a ballet barre): The barre is essential to dancers. This is where class begins. You walk in take your place and start the beginning exercises to get your body warmed up. With out the barre, dance would be even more difficult because the muscles are not yet ready to do the work the rest of the dance class requires. This barre is my cross. I chose to be a dancer. Taking up the barre, where the core of dance begins, was my decision. It is more than a little odd being the only guy in almost every single ballet class. But it is who I am. My heart and soul jump for joy every time I step up to that barre. I find God on the dance floor and that makes my barre, my cross seem lighter. In dance, I am able to feel how truly great God is. I see Him in the movement and togetherness as the dancers perform from the heart. I see Him in the music that flows and beats allowing us to create masterpieces for all to see. I see Him in the expression of the audience who understand and appreciate the hard work that goes into every single performance. And finally I see Him on the stage after a performance because every dancer poured out their heart and soul on that stage and made this beautiful thing that only God Himself could have a hand in making. But, in order to meet God in that way, I need to step up to the barre.

I made the decision to skip soccer practice and go to dance class nine years ago. I tried, for a while, to do both soccer and dance but soon both required all of my attention. Dance was my choice. Since that decision many years ago dance has allowed me to excel in many places and roles. I have been able to dance in well known ballets such as Coppelia and Cinderella. I have been in six productions of The Nutcracker, the most recent of which I was the Nutcracker Prince. Choosing dance has also allowed me to travel to Prague in the Czech Republic to compete in a dance festival and win first place in classical dance.

But, taking such a different path from the norm led to so much ridicule in school. I was on the receiving end of many jokes and nasty rumors. Everyday seemed to bring more taunts and laughter by everyone except me. Some day I didn't want to go to school because I thought that the bullies would be too much to handle that day. Of course, I had my doubts about making the decision to dance, but when I stepped up to this barre and I knew that all the hardships were worth it. "What good is it for a man to gain the world, yet forfeit his soul?". Some days the cross bears down on me and I think I have to put it down. Jesus must have felt the same way as he carried his cross to Calvary. But I will not put it down. I decided to pick up my cross and follow Jesus, and I know that when my cross seems to heavy to bear, He will be right there with an extra shoulder and some encouraging words because He knows how important this decision was to me.

So, now we have to think. What is your cross? And more importantly, will you decide to pick it up? Will you accept the challenge? Will you sacrifice yourself and walk with Christ no matter what anyone else says? Will you?