

Mark 8:27-9:1

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." 9:1 And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

## CLINGING TO A KNAPSACK

A small plane with five passengers on it had an engine malfunction and was going down. The pilot came out of the cockpit with a parachute pack strapped on his back and addressed the group:

"Folks, there is bad news, and there is good news. The bad news is that the plane's going down, and there's nothing more I can do. The good news is that there are several parachute packs by the wall back there.

The bad news is that there are four of them and five of you. But good luck. Thank you for choosing our airline, and we hope you have a good evening, wherever your final destination may be."

He gave the group a thumbs-up sign and was out the door.

A woman leaped up from her seat. "I'm one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the northeast. My patients depend on me." She grabbed a pack, strapped it on her back, and leaped out.

A man stood up. "I am a partner in a large law practice, and the office would fall to pieces without me." He grabbed a pack, strapped it on his back, and leaped out.

Another man stood up and said, "I am arguably the smartest man in the world. My IQ is so high I won't even tell you what it is. But surely you understand that I must have a parachute."

He grabbed a bundle and leaped out.

That left only two people on the plane, a middle-aged pastor and a teenage boy. "Son," said the pastor, "you take the last parachute. You're young; you have your whole life ahead of you. God bless you and safe landing."

The teenager grinned at the older man. "Thanks, pastor, but there are still two parachutes left. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my knapsack."

When the time of testing comes in our life we will all find ourselves in midair clinging to something. We'd better hope that we are clinging to the thing that can save us.

So, what's the answer? What can save us? What can give us life?

### LOSING IN ORDER TO SAVE

Jesus said, "For those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it."

In other words sometimes in our haste to save ourselves we grab the wrong thing. Ironically, salvation does not come through trying to preserve our life. Salvation comes through giving our life away for the sake of the gospel.

This is the opposite of what the world teaches us. The world tells us that the good life consists of holding on to what we've got and getting even more. Life is defined by what we have.

We cling for dear life to other people, money, possessions, alcohol, food, our looks, our youth, the prestige of our job, and so forth. You name it, and we cling to it.

Unfortunately we are clinging to a knapsack instead of a parachute. There is only one pearl of great price. There is only one way to salvation. And that is the way of Jesus.

Only God as revealed in Jesus can save us. And that means trusting God more than anything else. That means letting go of everything so that we can cling to the One who saves. If our arms are always filled with the things of the world, we will not be able to embrace Jesus and those "little ones" whom we are to embrace in His name.

### THE FAKE JESUS

But, in order to follow Jesus we have to follow the real Jesus and not the fake Jesus so many follow. We learn in today's lesson that from the very beginning people had the wrong idea about Jesus.

They thought he was like John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets of old. Jesus in their eyes would be a powerful military leader and lead the people to victory over their enemies. Jesus would be a Messiah in the mold of David or Jesus' namesake, Joshua.

That's what the people believed and that's what the disciples believed as well. When Jesus asked the disciples, "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" Peter said, "You are the Messiah."

Now it's out in the open. This is the hope that the disciples and the people had been clinging to. Finally, they said it out loud. Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus would be a great religious and military leader who would set his people free.

Jesus would be a wonder worker who would overcome the powers that be. But, they were clinging to a knapsack instead of a parachute. Salvation would not come through military victory. Surprisingly, salvation would come by way of the cross and resurrection.

No one understood that. So, to avoid confusion, Jesus told his disciples to cut out the Messiah talk. Don't tell anyone what you've heard. Instead follow me on this path that leads to the cross.

Jesus does not want to be defined as an instrument of raw, divine power. In Mark's gospel He silences the demons when he casts them out, He swears to secrecy those whom he cures, and He cuts off any talk about making him a king.

## SUFFERING AND SATAN

But when it comes to the necessity for suffering, Jesus holds nothing back. He told all who would be his disciples to follow him to Jerusalem where he would suffer, die, and then on the third day rise again. The Scripture tells us that Jesus said this openly. He said this not only to his disciples but also to the crowd. No doubt this was deeply disturbing to those who wanted a different kind of Messiah.

Peter took Jesus aside, grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to shake some sense into him. "Jesus, don't you know about the power of positive thinking? How can we convince the crowd to join us in the revolution when you're talking about suffering and death?"

But, Jesus would not substitute the way of the world for God's way. Jesus turned his back on Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Sometimes even our best friends play the role of Satan, tempting us to live in a way that is at odds with God's way, tempting us to live down to the expectations of the world instead of living up to God's way. Jesus would not bring in the kingdom by doing it the world's way. The devil's way is the way of pride and power and material gain. God's way is the way of sacrifice and service.

## THE INVERTED LOGIC OF THE GOSPEL

Jesus could only bring salvation to the world through the cross and the resurrection. Jesus lost his life for the sake of God's kingdom on the cross. But, when Jesus loses his life on the cross, he is given a greater life through the resurrection.

And Jesus says that it will work the same way for His disciples. When they lose their lives for the sake of the gospel, when they deny themselves, when they take up a cross and follow him, ironically they will find their lives.

In small ways many of us have experienced this "inverted logic" of the gospel. We have noticed that when we give a gift to another that we receive a much greater gift in return. We discover that when we love another and give everything for the sake of another that then, perhaps for the first time, we know what it means to be loved. Many of us have found the old saying to be true. There's no better way to find a friend than be a friend.

There are many small examples like this of how sacrifice and service in the long run bring about salvation. But, the world tells us a different story. From an early age the world tells us that the only way to security is through possessions and power. The world tells us that we can only be happy by having more, by satisfying all our wants.

But, the One who gave up everything on the cross and was raised from the dead teaches us a different way. Life and salvation do not come through being first. Life and salvation come through being last and the servant of all.

It's no wonder they disbelieved and rejected Jesus. Who wants to be a part of a kingdom that promotes self-sacrifice?

Well, actually I would contend that there are quite a few people who would answer such a call. We do not have to give up the essence of the gospel in order to attract disciples. There are many people who instinctively know that giving up everything for a greater cause is the way to true life.

For example, why do young people join the military? Many join because they love their country so much that they are even willing to risk their life for their

country. Why did the ambassador to Libya and the three ex-Seals who were killed go to a dangerous part of the world and risk their life? They wanted to serve their country and make life better for the people of Libya.

It has been fashionable since the days of Aristotle to criticize young people. But, I see hope in the willingness of many to sacrifice for the greater good. There is much to admire in those who put the highest priority on a life of service and greater meaning.

A recruiter for Teach for America—a program that recruits bright, young people from college campuses to teach in America's most deprived school systems—once came to visit Duke University. To an auditorium full of Duke students she said,

"Looking at you tonight, I don't know why I'm here. I can tell looking at you that you're bound for bright futures, success. And here I stand, trying to recruit you for a salary of \$15,000 a year in some of the worst schools in America, begging you to waste your life for a bunch of ungrateful kids in the backwoods of Appalachia or inner city Philadelphia.

I must have been crazy to come here. But I do have some literature up here, and I would be willing to talk to anybody who happens to be interested. The meeting is over."

The recruiter knew what she was doing. An amazing number of students went forward, dying to give themselves to something bigger and more important than their own selves.

## PETER TODAY

Some of us in ministry have made the same mistake that Peter made. We think that the gospel has to be what we want in order to be good news. And so we grab Jesus by the shoulders and try to shake some sense into him.

"Jesus, people in the modern world don't want to hear about sacrifice, not even a little bit. If we're going to be successful we're going to have to tweak the message a bit.

I've got an idea. Let's replace the cross with a video screen. And let's put in theater seats instead of those uncomfortable pews.

We've got to have a positive message, Jesus. No more talk about sacrifice and service. Instead let's talk about how following you will get us what we want.

We know you can do it. You're a miracle worker after all."

Sound familiar?

Jesus responded to a similar plea from Peter with a “take no prisoners” attitude. He turned his back on Peter and said, “Get behind me Satan.”

We need to follow His lead. Today’s lesson is at the very heart of the gospel. And if we get this wrong, we will get everything else wrong as well.

We cannot take the cross out of our sanctuaries or more importantly we cannot take the cross out of our lives. Instead, we need to take up the cross of self-sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom.

## TRUE LIFE

And oddly enough when we deny ourselves, when we take up the cross we find the salvation we were seeking in the first place. We find true life.

Jesus doesn’t take on the burden of the cross to save us from our cross. It is just the opposite. He takes on the burden of the cross so that we can take on ours.

He makes the hard life of faithfulness possible and less lonely. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith the Bible tells us. (Hebrews 12:2)

In other words Jesus blazes the trail for us to follow. The sacrifice of the cross and the salvation of the resurrection provide a template for our life.

The hard things in life often tell us the truth about what really matters, what we are made of, and most importantly what we really believe. What do we cling to when the plane is going down? It needs to be more than the knapsack of pride and wealth. It needs to be the hope of the gospel.

## MORTALITY AND THE GOSPEL

When we accept our own mortality, when we accept the suffering that will inevitably come our way as a part of the human condition, we are drawn together as a family of faith. We are united in our fragile, humble reality.

I am a Christian because in Christ the central problem of humanity, our mortality is confronted. Jesus asks us to embrace our mortality in our ministry to others. Jesus asks us to sacrifice on the behalf of others. Jesus asks us to live a life of service.

We can do that because we believe that death, the final enemy does not have the last word. Whenever Jesus talks about suffering and the cross, he also talks about the resurrection.

You may have noticed that I included one more verse in our lesson for today. The lectionary leaves out Mark 9:1, which reads, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

All the commentators say that this verse belongs with this passage. But, I can understand why the lectionary might leave it out.

This verse might suggest to some that Mark is predicting the end of the age. If that's the way you interpret that verse you may think that Mark made a mistake. But, I don't think so.

The disciples did get to see the kingdom of God come with power. It came with power in the resurrection of Jesus. There was more to Jesus than suffering and a cross. There was resurrection. And resurrection changed everything forever.

We believe that there is more to our life than suffering and a cross. There is the hope of a New Creation when heaven will come to earth and remake all things. There is the hope that in life and in death we belong to God.

This belief not only gives us hope for the future. It also gives us courage for the living of these days.

And so I would encourage all of us to drop the knapsack of pride and wealth. Instead, let us take up the one thing that will really save us.

Let us take up our cross and follow Him.

Amen.