

Follow Me
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Mark 8:31-38

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."

NOT KNOWING WHAT WE'RE GETTING INTO

What do we preachers say to a young couple when they are planning to get married? Most of us just try to get them to be sure that they "know what they are getting into."

But, do we really know what we're getting into when we get married? Did we know what we were getting into when we got married?

Every marriage has twists and turns that can't be predicted. There will be times of struggle. And there will be times of deep satisfaction. But, there is no sure fire way to predict the success of a marriage.

How can we get them to understand what they're getting into when we don't really know?

The same can be said for the disciples of Jesus. Jesus told them those first disciples to follow, and they did. They dropped everything to follow Jesus. But, they didn't really know what they were getting into.

Today our lesson comes once again in the middle of Mark's gospel. Up until this time Mark has told us about Jesus' travels through Galilee.

It is a rapid, urgent chain of events. As we've talked about before, everything in Mark's gospel happens immediately.)

Jesus healed sick and troubled people. He told parables. He fed thousands with only a few scraps of food. He walked on water. He stood up the criticism of the Jewish leaders and reached out to the Gentiles.

What was Jesus up to? Who was he? Opinions varied.

Certainly, the ministry of Jesus was not enthusiastically received by everyone. Some thought that he was crazy. Others thought he might even be in league with the devil. (Mark 3:19-22)

Even the disciples have a hard time understanding Jesus. And so throughout the gospel of Mark the question persists.

It's like that popular song, "Who are you? Who, Who?"

That was the song they were singing about Jesus in Mark's gospel.

Everyone really wants to know. But, no one really knows ... until now.

KEEP QUIET

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today, Jesus asks the question that has been on everyone's lips. But, this time he asks the disciples to answer for themselves. He asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter gets up the nerve to say out loud what the disciples had been thinking. "You are the Messiah. You are the one for whom we've been waiting."

Peter and many of us would like to end Mark's story right here.

The dramatic healing, the perplexing parables, the incredible miracles now make sense. Jesus is no longer a crazy person or in league with the devil.

Jesus is the caring helper. Jesus is the wise teacher. Jesus is the one who welcomes all. Jesus is just that kind of Messiah.

I can preach that sermon. Just as Jesus was compassionate so we need to care for others and be hospitable to all.

Now we know. We can shout it from the mountaintops. Right? Not exactly.

What does Jesus say to Peter and the other disciples? Does he say "good job for having such insight and understanding?" Does this mark the beginning of the revolution? Not at all.

Jesus does not say what they expect. Instead, Jesus "sternly" warns the disciples. He tells them not to speak a word about this to anyone. The Greek word is a very strong word; it's a word that usually means rebuke.

Mark's portrayal of this event is quite different from the other gospels.

Jesus does not say that Peter is a rock upon which the church will be built. Instead, Peter and the other disciples are told to keep quiet in no uncertain terms.

JESUS SPEAKS OPENLY

So, Jesus wants the disciples to keep quiet.

But, in our lesson for today Jesus speaks openly in a way that is alarming.

He speaks about the cross that the Messiah must bear. Jesus tells anyone who will listen that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the political and religious leaders, suffer death, and then on the third day rise again.

I don't think the disciples even heard that last part about rising again. And if they did they probably didn't understand what it meant. After all the resurrection was a totally unique, one of a kind event. It would be hard for anyone to conceive of such a thing, much less believe in it.

But, they did understand what Jesus was saying about suffering. Everyone in the ancient Roman empire understand the meaning of the cross.

For many of us the cross is piece of jewelry or a sign of faith that we put in our sanctuary.

But, in Jesus' day a cross was a means of execution. Someone once said that when we wear crosses around our necks it is as if we were wearing miniature gold electric chairs.

This form of execution by torture was designed to frighten anyone who would dare to take up arms against the Romans.

Brave people might not be afraid of dying in the service of their country. They might even be willing to be martyrs.

But only a fool would dare to die on the cross, or at least that's what the Romans thought. And that's what the Peter thought as well.

No wonder Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. What Jesus was saying could prove to be dangerous not only for Jesus but also for those who would follow him. This isn't the way a Messiah is supposed to go.

If the disciples had known what Jesus tells them now, do you think they would have followed him?

We might risk death in order to attain a military victory. But, who would follow a Messiah who tells his disciples to take up a cross?

So, Peter took Jesus aside and tried to knock some sense into him. Peter said,

“This is no way for a Messiah to act.
What’s wrong with you Jesus?”

But, Jesus did not accept the counsel of his disciple who tried to talk some sense into him in private.
Jesus rebuked Peter publicly.

TEMPTATION

Actually, Jesus did quite a bit more than rebuke Peter.

He turned his back on Peter. Then he turned toward the disciples and the crowd and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Peter has the insight to call Jesus the Messiah. But, in the very next scene in the story he plays a cameo role as Satan. Why did Jesus say that Peter was Satan? Peter played the role of Satan because his actions actually tempted Jesus to deny the necessity of the cross.

Even though Jesus spoke openly about the way of the cross, he also struggled with the horrible implications all the way to Jerusalem. We talked about this last week.

Mark tells us that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus threw himself on the ground in prayer and pleaded with his heavenly Father to find another way to get the job done. But, there was no other way and Jesus finally accepted the difficult sacrifice he would have to make. (Mark 14.35-36)

The way of faith is always a struggle. Even for Jesus it was a struggle.

CROSS VERSUS GLORY

The great leader of the Reformation, Martin Luther talked about the contrast between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross.

The theology of glory is built on our around us and what we want. The theology of glory confirms what we want in a god. The theology of glory tells us of a god who gives us what we want and never requires any sacrifice.

Unfortunately, this is what many of us preach. We preach about a mythical god who only wants to make us happy and give us what we want. But, this theology of glory is not what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross is built on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. It teaches us that God saves through the weakness of suffering and death. It teaches us that the "way things should be" is not the Way of God.

Later Paul would write that the cross looks like foolishness and weakness, especially in a world that looks for wisdom and strength in its gods. But, the so-called weakness and foolishness of God, that is the cross is wiser and more powerful than anything the world can imagine. (1 Corinthians 1:18-31)

Peter did not understand what God was doing in Jesus. He had more to learn about the God he worshipped and the Messiah he followed.

But, we can understand his instincts. We share Peter's reservations and questions.

Why should God's Son suffer in such a way?

It didn't seem fair. It didn't seem godly.

Who would believe that the God of heaven and earth would redeem the world in this way?

How could death on a cross, a cross reserved for the worst criminals bring eternal salvation? Who would predict that God's strength would be revealed in such apparent weakness?

Not us. The theology of the cross is still a hard message to preach in our world. Our world prizes success, personal fulfillment and deliverance from all that ails us.

But, the Bible just won't let us believe that.

We cannot follow Jesus to "claim our miracle" as some put it. (In the Bible Jesus would never do a miracle on demand. His miracles were always an unexpected sign of the kingdom that was coming.)

Much to our chagrin, the theology of the cross tells us that faith is not certainty, hope is not optimism, and love is never painless.

That's not what we want to hear. We still want a theology of glory.

But, the theology of glory is a lie. More than that, it is the temptation of the devil. And sometimes that temptation comes in the form of a well meaning but misinformed friend.

Mark's gospel makes it too plain to miss.

We can't paint a picture of a tolerant Jesus who only helps and heals and welcomes. Mark's gospel won't let us do that. Mark's gospel won't let us turn religion into just another way to enhance human possibilities.

Mark says it openly and directly.
The theology of glory is heresy.

And if we teach this heresy, when people have a great tragedy in life they will lose the false "faith" that we have taught them. They will believe that God has let them down because God has not saved them from their dire circumstances.

God as revealed in Jesus does not teach a theology of glory. God as revealed in Jesus teaches us a theology of the cross. The Bible teaches us that not everything goes our way, and oddly enough not everything goes God's way.

But, God has a way of taking a cross; God has a way of taking our broken and fear-ridden lives and turning things around. In the cross and resurrec-

tion of Jesus we don't discover the god we want, but we do discover the God we desperately need.

He is the God who sheds glory to join us in our shame. He is the God who leaves heaven to enter our hells on earth. He is the God who abandons strength, at least strength, as we know it, in order to save us in our places of weakness.

God's strong love surrounds us when we am broken and bruised. And oddly enough the way to get better is not to always "expect a miracle". The way to get better is to take up a cross and follow Jesus.

A CROSS SHAPED LIFE

I know.

We're not Jesus.

We're not going to die on the cross for the world.

But, we can live a life that is cruciform in shape. We can live a life that is marked by service and sacrifice. We can give up our expectations, our hopes and dreams in order to follow our Savior.

And oddly enough, when we do that, life is more abundant. Our hope is more sure.

That's what Jesus was talking about when he told the crowd, "...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."

I like how Eugene Peterson amplifies the meaning of verses 35 and 36. He writes,

"Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering, embrace it. Follow me.

I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way to saving yourself, your true self.

What good is it to get everything you want and lose you, the real you?
What could you ever trade your soul for?"

In our passage for today those who would be disciples of Christ are encouraged to deny themselves, take up their cross and *follow him*.

Following Jesus does not come naturally. In fact, following in general is discouraged by our society.

We would consider it an insult if someone told us, "You know, your kid is a real follower!" In our society being a follower is for people who are weak and passive.

And yet following lies at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Despite bumper stickers to the contrary, Jesus is not our co-pilot. Jesus is in the driver's seat.

Our job is to follow Jesus.

And where does Jesus lead? He leads us to deny ourselves and take up a cross. He leads us to serve others even as He has served us.

THE MEANING OF COMMUNION

We would rather not deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow Jesus.

But, if we do not follow Jesus where can we go? He has the words of eternal life. If we do not follow Jesus we will find ourselves in a very lonely, godforsaken place.

That's why we take the Lord's Supper. It is a reminder of who we are and whose we are.

When we take *Communion* we remember that we are not alone. The Spirit of God in Christ is with us. We have communion with him.

He understands what it means to be broken because his body was broken for us. He understands what it means to lose everything because his blood was shed for us.

But, communion is about more than our relationship, our communion with Jesus. It is also about our relationship, our communion with each other. We take this bread and drink this cup together.

We have *communion* with our fellow Christians, our fellow travelers on this road to the cross and the resurrection.

We pray for each other. We support each other. We give thanks for each other.

We are a community that believes God still takes body broken and blood shed and turns those symbols of pain into symbols of eternal hope.

Communion reminds us that we follow Jesus on the road to the cross. And on that road we find salvation.

Amen.