

"Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me"

Mark 8:31-38

In the eighth chapter of Mark, Jesus predicts his suffering and death, rebukes Peter, and challenges his followers to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel. The vocabulary of discipleship is not always peaceful, since it includes calls for self-sacrifice, predictions of suffering and violent outbursts such as "Get behind me, Satan!" To be a follower of Jesus is a life-and-death battle - challenging, stressful and painful.

Before we fall into formation behind Jesus, we need to count the cost.

Mark tells us that Jesus began to teach the disciples "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" (8:31). These words set the stage for the drama of the remaining chapters of the gospel of Mark, right through to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The vocabulary of this verse is a violent shock to the disciples - they cannot believe their ears when Jesus says that the Son of Man must suffer.

In their eyes, Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. They know him by the powerful titles, "Son of God" and "Son of Man." They expect that he

will exercise authority and establish the kingdom of God on earth. They see him as their divinely chosen leader, and they are anxious for him to show his power as God's anointed king - maybe even by overthrowing the hated Romans who rule the land.

But Jesus says that he must undergo great suffering.

This would be like the newly inaugurated president of the United States, in his first address to the nation, proclaiming, "I must undergo great suffering and rejection, and be killed by the people of this great country." It would be completely unexpected. Unbelievable. Unacceptable.

Peter thinks that Jesus is insane, possessed by a demon, in need of exorcism. According to Mark, he took Jesus aside "and began to rebuke him" - the verb for "rebuke," *epitimao*, is strong language, often used in reference to silencing demons. So Peter is hitting Jesus with some serious flak.

Jesus responds by rebuking Peter with the words, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (vs. 32-33). He wastes no time in undermining Peter, because he is convinced that Peter is charging in the completely wrong direction, toward the earthly instead of the heavenly.

These are fighting words - the language of silencing demons and scolding colleagues. As violent as it sounds, it is the vocabulary of discipleship.

But what does it mean?

With these words, Jesus is making his position clear. He is not the United States Secretary of Defense making decisions about military matters from a position of safety many miles from the fighting. Instead, he is down in the trenches with his comrades, on the front lines of the spiritual battleground. When he says that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering," he is speaking in a very matter-of-fact way about what lies ahead for him. Rejection by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes - that's inevitable for someone who is willing to buck the religious establishment and show people a new way to God. Even death makes sense when you are determined to march into a hostile city, upset the tables of the money-changers, and predict that the temple will be destroyed.

Jesus is willing to put his life on the lines as he moves toward his destiny in Jerusalem. He is not a basket case, but a person determined to devote body, mind and spirit to the work that God has called him to do. He's not interested in satisfying the expectations of others, not even the dreams of his closest friends. All that concerns him is doing the will of God.

There's a message for us here, especially as we struggle to find our focus as Christians. In our multi-tasking world, we have a hard time sorting out the competing demands of family, work, community, friends and church, and our endless activity can leave us feeling scattered and even shattered. With remarkable clarity, Jesus gives us a new vocabulary for discipleship.

Set your mind on divine things, he says. Not on human things. And be willing to suffer.

Willing to ... suffer? Yes, suffer.

"The Son of Man must undergo great suffering," says Jesus. And so must those who follow him.

Now this is not to say that suffering is pleasant or desirable in any way. We shouldn't seek it for ourselves, or overlook it in others. But Jesus knows that there are some things worth suffering for - and so do we, if we think about it. A soldier on the front lines, fighting for freedom and justice. A mother in a delivery room, giving birth to a baby. A student, staying up all night to read a medical textbook. There are some kinds of suffering that produce great good.

Unfortunately, we live in a society that avoids suffering at almost any cost. We want our military to be successful without any sacrifice from civilians. We

want more social services without higher taxes. We want to lose weight without cutting our calories or increasing our exercise.

We don't want to suffer.

But the vocabulary of discipleship includes suffering, and Jesus sees it as an important part of marching on the pathway to God. "There can be no love without suffering," insists Pope Benedict, "because it always involves an element of self-sacrifice." We simply cannot mature into the loving and sacrificial people God wants us to be, if we skedaddle away from suffering.

Jesus illustrates this life of loving sacrifice by lifting up the image of the cross. Calling to both the crowd and his disciples, he says, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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" (vs. 34-35).

A young minister was asked by a funeral director to hold a grave-side service for a homeless man, with no family or friends, who had died while traveling through the area. The funeral was to be held at a cemetery way back in the country, and this man would be the first to be laid to rest there. The young minister tells this story ...

As I was not familiar with the backwoods area, I became lost; and being a typical man I did not stop for directions. I finally arrived an hour late. I saw the crew, eating lunch, but the hearse was nowhere in sight. I apologized to the workers for my tardiness, and stepped to the side of the open grave, where I saw the vault lid already in place. I assured the workers I would not hold them long but this was the proper thing to do.

The workers gathered around, still eating their lunch. I poured out my heart and soul. As I preached, the workers began to say "Amen," "Praise the Lord," and "Glory." I preached, and I preached, like I'd never preached before. I closed the lengthy service with a prayer and walked to my car. I felt I had taken up my cross for the homeless man and that the crew would leave with a renewed sense of purpose and dedication, and were ready to take up their crosses and follow Jesus.

As I was opening the door and taking off my coat, I overheard one of the workers saying to another, "I ain't never seen anything like this before ... and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years." Take up your cross and follow Jesus!

One of our parishioners in prison is learning how to take up his cross and follow Jesus. This is an excerpt from a letter dated January 22, 2009 ... Pastor Doug, hello, how are you? Hopefully, well. I'm hanging in there as best as possible. Happy belated season greetings to you, since it's been a while since I've had any correspondence with you. I hope everything went well for you and

everyone else in the community. I would've given a limb to be able to be a part of the church for the holidays, especially that midnight mass on Christmas Eve, as it is always a very special and memorable service for me. Things here were very dismal, they didn't even hold any sort of service on Christmas day, and Christmas Eve there wasn't even a mass. I went over to the chapel thinking it was a service, and all we did was sing Silent Night and watch the original version of Scrooge. None of the religious services and Bible studies here compare to what they had to offer at the county jail. I was looking forward to keeping and maintaining a strong faith walk here, but it has definitely tapered off, because I struggle to get anything or a decent message out of what they offer. I am glad to hear though that you are reminded of me every time you dress and get preped in the small meeting room. I was even more pleased to see my picture made the cover for the Sunday, January 4, 9:00 a.m. service bulletin. Dad just sent me a copy of it last week. He said you even spoke about it, or used some of the biblical references in that particular sermon. I would of loved to heard what you had to say, and how you incorporated it. But I was just glad to be able to be a part of things in some way. So thank you so much for doing that, it means a lot to me.

Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (v. 34). This is a tough message because it suggests that nothing less than complete devotion will do wherever we are. But the stakes are high, as Jesus reminds the crowd, and the consequences eternal: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (v.38). Hmm.

Take up the cross. Not the pretty crosses, the ones made of gold or silver or brass or carved wood. Not the polished ones that adorn church walls or altars.

Take up the instrument of execution - be prepared for serious suffering, even discipleship.

Will Willimon is a United Methodist bishop, but in his former life, he was dean of the chapel at Duke University where he recalled a campus visit from a representative from Teach America. Teach America tries to recruit this nation's most talented college graduates to go into some of the nation's worst public schools. This is Teach America's means of transforming our schools into something better. Will says ... This woman stood up in front of a large group of Duke students, a larger group than I would suppose would come out to this sort of thing, and said to them, "I can tell by looking at you that I have probably come to the wrong place. Somebody told me this was a BMW campus and I can believe it looking at you. Just looking at you, I can tell that all of you are a success. Why would you all be on this campus if you were not successful, if you were not going on to successful careers on Madison Avenue or Wall Street?"

"And yet here I stand, hoping to talk one of you into giving away your life in the toughest job you will ever have. I am looking for people to go into the hollows of West Virginia, into the ghettos of south Los Angeles and teach in some of the most difficult schools in the world. Last year, two of our teachers were killed while on the job.

And I can tell, just by looking at you, that none of you are interested in that. So go on to law school, or whatever successful thing you are planning on doing. But if by chance, some of you just happen to be interested, I've got these brochures here for you to tell about Teach America. Meeting's over."

With that, the whole group stood up, pushed into the aisles, shoved each other aside, ran down to the front, and fought over those brochures.

Dr. Willimon says, "That evening I learned an important insight: People want something more out of life than even happiness. People want to be part of an

adventure. People want to be part of a project greater than their lives."

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross
and follow me. "

#667 - Take Up Your Cross, the Savior Said