

The way of the cross

The gospel according to Mark is divided into sixteen chapters. The story we just heard comes from the very center of Mark's gospel, and not only in terms of its physical location within the written text, but also in terms of its theological significance. Mark intentionally places this conversation between Jesus and the disciples at the very heart, the very center of the Gospel.

Here is the background to today's reading, also from chapter 8. Jesus had been traveling with his companions, and at one point they make their way to the city of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi literally means Philip is Caesar, or Philipp is Lord. Jesus and his companions have now traveled into Gentile country, far from the Jewish cities of Jerusalem, or Nazareth, or Cana, or any of the cities where Jesus and his disciples grew up and lived their daily lives. They are far from home, out there in the rest of the world, among the Gentiles, where Philip is declared to be Lord, not the God of Israel. It is there that Jesus asks disciples this question, "Who do people say that I am?" They begin by giving the answers they have heard from others, "Well, some say that you are John the Baptist. Others have been saying that you are the prophet, Elijah. Still others claim that you are one of the other prophets." Then Jesus gives this all-important question, "But you, who do you say that I am?"

Peter responds, "You are the Messiah." In Hebrew the word means literally "anointed one," and it is translated into English as Messiah; in Greek, the word becomes *Christos*, where we get our English word, Christ. But it is the same word, it means the same thing: Christ or Messiah. You are Christ, Peter says. That is the right answer, and Jesus affirms that. For generations the Jews had been hoping for the coming of the Messiah, one who would be a great political and military leader, like King David of old, one who would destroy the oppressive forces of Rome, and return Israel to her ancient glory.

Yes, Jesus is the Messiah. And then Jesus teaches Peter and the disciples what that will mean. This is where today's gospel reading picks up. Jesus tells that that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by those the elders and chief priests, and scribes; he will be killed, and after three days rise again.

This is a hard teaching, and Peter doesn't like this path for his teacher, his friend, the one known to be the Messiah. Peter has seen Jesus' work miracles, he has watched him cast out demons, heal the sick, and teach about the kingdom of God. So, Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. Mark doesn't give us the exact conversation, but we do know that "rebuke" is a very strong word. Peter may have said something like, "Jesus, you're wrong on this. Don't talk this way. Be the Messiah we are all hoping for, for heaven's sake. The Messiah is supposed to bring victory and power and then peace. That's what you are supposed to be. Stop all this talk of suffering and rejection and death."

Then Jesus, in front of everyone, rebukes Peter. This time Mark records what a proper rebuke sounds like. In some of the strongest language Jesus ever uses with his disciples, he calls Peter a devil, literally. "Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind on your own way of thinking, on human ways, not on the ways of God." Jesus knows what it means for him to be the Messiah; he has been walking that path his entire life. "This is the path for me," Jesus tells them. It will mean walking the way of the cross. Rejection, suffering, and death. Jesus knows this, he trusts God in this, and he will be faithful on this path. Peter and the others need to understand.

Jesus next calls not just the disciples, but the entire crowd all around them, and he tells them all, "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."

Mark places this declaration of who Jesus is at the very center of his gospel. He also places there the central statement of what it means for everyone, including you and me, who want to follow Jesus. At the center of our lives as disciples, this is what Jesus calls us to. No matter where we are on our spiritual journey, at church, at home, far off in Caesarea Philippi, or here in Salt Lake City, Jesus asks each of us this central question, "Who do you say that I am?" Not just what you have heard others say. Not what you read in a book or heard some guy preach in a sermon. "Who do you say that I am?" The truth is, everyone who follows Jesus needs to explore and answer that question for themselves.

Like the disciples, the way we can do that is to get to know Jesus, to seek him, to spend time with him, to listen to his words. And then, at some point, we will be able to answer, like Peter, "I don't know everything, but I will put my heart toward what I

do know. You are the Christ.” And then, as Peter learned, saying the right words is only the beginning. Because Jesus then teaches that he must walk the way of the cross, and if we want to follow him, that will be our path, too.

What does it mean to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus? What does it mean that in order to save our life we must lose it for Jesus and for the sake of the gospel he came to proclaim? These are questions we need to spend some time with, and pray with. These are answers we need to come to for ourselves.

When Jesus asks us to deny ourselves and follow him, I believe that Jesus is calling us to something much larger than ourselves. We go through much of life thinking it is all about us – it’s about what we do, what we accomplish, what we acquire, what others think about us. Jesus reveals that there is more. Jesus wants us to know your life is not about you; you are to be about Life. Life that only God can offer. Life in abundance. Giving your life to bring healing and life to others. That is what Jesus did, fully. This is what you and I are to give your life to. That is how we live our life for the sake of Jesus and for the sake of the gospel.

To follow Jesus means that we will be asked to go where Jesus leads, not just go the way that I would always want or choose for myself. Left on our own, we would often choose what serves us, what benefits us, what makes our life easier. The gospel life is bigger than that; we are to give ourselves to compassion for others, to living God with our whole being, to work for justice and peace for everyone, especially those who are usually left out, neglected, mistreated, or pushed aside. Lose your life for that, Jesus asks of us. Give your life to the gospel, to that.

And Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him on the way of the cross. We hear the message of the cross at the center of Mark’s gospel. We have the cross as the central symbol of Christian life. It adorns the highest steeples of our churches; we have large crosses in the most visible places inside our church buildings. In Lent, we have the fourteen stations of the cross all around us. Many of us wear a reminder of cross or we make the sign of the cross during worship and prayer. We are surrounded by the message of the cross. What is being asked of us to take up our cross on our own journey, in our own life?

I believe that to take up one’s cross is to take what life brings, that includes the tragic, the hardships, the things we cannot fix or get rid of; and we are to somehow

bear them, and not lose faith, and to keep trusting God, and believe that God can bring life even from this. Even from a cross. That is message of the cross in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We are asked to bear the hard reality and difficulty that life brings our way. We don't always get to choose what crosses we will bear. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, let this cup pass from me." We pray the same with our own crosses. "Dear God, take this from me." But then, in faith, we try to pray as best we can the next words from Jesus, "But not what I will, O God, but let your will be done." Jesus walked the way of the cross to the end. He poured out his life out of love for us, and gave himself even to death, trusting that even there, God would bring new life.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 12, Paul writes that he was given a thorn in his flesh that tormented him terribly. We are never told what that affliction was, but Paul explains that he pleaded and prayed that God would take it from him. Many of us carry our own thorns in our own lives that afflict us. It could be a chronic illness, dealing with depression, or addiction, it could be a wound we carry in our body or soul. And we pray, "If only you would take this from me, O God, then life would be easier, I could serve you better." Paul writes that three times he appealed for God to remove the thorn in his flesh. Many of us might admit that we have asked God three *hundred* times to remove our afflictions.

But the cross was not lifted from Paul. Instead, God responded, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." My grace is sufficient for you. My power will be revealed even in your weakness, your affliction. Here is a cross, Paul learned. And it is through this, through this very burden and affliction, that God will bring power and life. "And so," Paul writes, I will boast in this weakness, so the power of Christ may dwell in me. Hardship, suffering, I will bear them for the sake of Christ, for I have learned that whenever I am weak, then I am strong." We walk the way of the cross, we take up our cross, and we find it to be the place of life and peace.

People who have grown in wisdom and grace will tell you that it is in their weakness, their addiction, their struggle with a chronic illness, in their daily wrestling with depression, it is through their loss, their heartbreak, it is through the thorn in their flesh, or the cross on their shoulder – it is in that very place they have found strength, and healing, and new life. They have learned on that long, hard road,

that God's grace is sufficient for them, for when they are weak, then, by the grace of God, they are strong.

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." We thank you, Lord Christ, that you are our companion, walking with us on the way of the cross. Amen.

Trace Browning

Year B – 2nd Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 • Psalm 22:22-30 • Romans 4:13-25 • Mark 8:31-38

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