

## **“THE SACRED CALLING OF CHRISTIANS”**

**Mark 8:31-38**

**February 28, 2021**

**Second Sunday in Lent**

Jesus warned them to keep it quiet, not to breathe a word of it to anyone. He then began explaining things to them: “It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive.” He said this simply and clearly so they couldn’t miss it.

But Peter grabbed him in protest. Turning and seeing his disciples wavering, wondering what to believe, Jesus confronted Peter. “Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.”

Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, “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 and 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 would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?”

“If any of you are embarrassed over me and the way I’m leading you when you get around your fickle and unfocused friends, know that you’ll be an even greater embarrassment to the Son of Man when he arrives in all the splendor of God, his Father, with an army of the holy angels.”

*Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

I received a random text the other night from an unknown sender. The person wanted the Zoom code for our worship service. For security reasons, I asked the person to self-identify and let me know what they were looking for in a church. The answer came back in language similar to other exchanges with church shoppers I have had in recent months:

1. We want a church closer to home.
2. We want a church that preaches the Word of God.

3. Our megachurch is just too big (she identified a well-known evangelical church in Parker as her former church home.)

I inquired further, letting the person know the essentials of how our church differs from other churches in our area. I told her of our WHY and how it is applied to welcome and include all people, regardless of their genetic or social markers.

The texter replied that her church “*doesn’t discriminate against LBGTQ, but I believe their teaching that LBGTQ is not the way of God.*” She then went on to question our fundamental identity:

“*Am I understanding right that you’re not a Christian church? If that’s the case, we are likely not a good fit.*”

The underlying assumption was that if we did not understand the *way of God* as interpreted within the framework of Bible literalism and fundamentalist teaching, we could not rightly call ourselves *Christians*.

This is the central question we face during the season of Lent: “What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus the Christ?” And since in our context, we are apostles *after the fact* rather than disciples *during the life of Jesus*, the question is refined even more to ask us each individually and as a church: “Just how is it that we call ourselves *Christian*?”

This central Lenten inquiry is also the central question of this passage from Mark’s Gospel. Jesus warns the disciples—as well as others standing around listening to him—that he must be persecuted, suffer, and die on the cross. He also says after three days (three being the number that symbolizes perfection in Biblical writing), he will live again and be glorified. He uses the word, *must* (*dei*, literally, meaning “it is necessary”) in his prophecy to make clear that his suffering and execution are not only inevitable, but also

*required.* Jesus—and all who follow him—will be persecuted and must also take up the cross.

As Mark is writing his Gospel, he and his fellow believers *are* being persecuted and vast numbers of Christians do not elude Nero's soldiers and his cruel tortures. Mark's Jesus aligns with the persecuted, rather than with the powerful. He stands alongside the faithful although it is not within his ability to spare them their suffering, any more than he can avoid it himself. Mark wants us to know the relational God, Jesus who is one of us. What does it mean that we must "take up the cross?"

Writes theologian Joseph D. Small:

The truth is that God's mercy is given to [the flawed], not reserved for the righteous; God's strength is exposed in weakness, not displayed in power; God's wisdom is veiled in parable and paradox, not set out in self-help maxims; God's life is disclosed in death.

This is what Jesus means when he says those who strive to save their life will lose it, while those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will save it. (By the way, this saying has nothing to do with the afterlife; it has everything to do with the meaning and quality of life lived in the present either in love of self-interest, or in love of God's interest.

"God is not conformed to human expectations or desires, for God is found in uncertainty, danger, and suffering...precisely where human wisdom perceives God's absence." (Small) It is easier for us to live in a created world of flower gardens and fluffy pillows when we manipulate God's unconditional love to our own purposes. But the way of the cross is not the sunshine and lazy Sunday mornings in bed that we have made Easter out to be. Easter is about perfecting the suffering, respecting one's journey to the cross, and

believing in spite of all of it God's plan that at the end of the suffering there will be a glorious up-rising. "A theology of the cross declares that the church is not Christendom, faith is not certainty, hope is not optimism, and loss is not painless...Mark's Gospel rules out a Christology built on a romanticized portrait of a tolerant Jesus who only helps and heals and welcomes...To confess Jesus as Messiah is to recognize his dying body on the cross, and to recognize that discipleship is the way of our own cross."

This means giving up our self-interest as Christians. It means giving up our preconceptions of what it means to follow Jesus. This Gospel story is astonishingly relevant. Peter was blinded by his own self-interest, not wanting to let go of Jesus to the fate Jesus knew must be his if God's Word was to mean anything at all. Peter was ground-in to his own agenda and Jesus did not share it. How often are we guilty of this hubris, the excessive pride we hold onto in defiance of God's will as it is revealed to us?

Rob Bell writes in *Love Wins*, the book we are studying this Lent, that "Jesus's story has been hijacked by a number of other stories, stories Jesus isn't interested in telling, because they have nothing to do with what he came to do." The story we *want to hear* is the story we tell over and over until we actually believe it—a sort of gaslighting of the self, though it is romanticized and painted with our own brushes.

"Arrogantly we assume that we know what must be done, so that a word from Jesus himself cannot dissuade us. Blinded by our prejudices, presuppositions, and preconceptions of the way things ought to be, we would not be convinced otherwise, even were someone to rise from the dead!" (w. Hulitt Gloer)

Hear this story:

There once were two lovers who lost sight of the whole world because they could only look into each other's eyes and hear only the words of love and devotion that rolled off their tongues with delicious ease. Their hearts beat as one. One day, one of them awoke to find the other gone and only a handwritten letter left on the table. The letter said goodbye, but pledged enduring honor and love.

The brokenhearted one wept and suffered, dragging through each day becoming more and more disheartened and depressed. Friends encouraged the one left behind to forget the lover and start over in search of another, more reliable mate. But it never happened.

Years later the letter resurfaced during a cleaning out of table drawers, and rediscovered, the brokenhearted lover read it over and over each morning thereafter, obsessed all over again. The gloominess felt all those years ago lifted and was replaced by an illogical hopefulness. When the lost love returned home sometime later, he was greeted warmly and deeply as though he had never been away. "I am grateful, but amazed that you are still waiting for me. How was it possible for you to remain faithful during my long absence?" he asked.

"Even you don't understand," the lover replied. "I believed in you because I had your word, in the letter." (adapted fr. William R. White, *Stories for the Journey*)

Jesus' friends didn't know what to expect in their future. When Jesus pledged to them, they could not receive it, instead denying the way of the cross and God's will. Jesus told them he would rise again after just three days dead, but Peter and the others could not hear the promise; they only heard

what derailed their own interests, their own agendas. They only heard that he would be taken away from them to suffer and die.

Lent forces us to bear down on the gospel good news—all of it, not just the sweet dessert parts of it. In our own lives, we know suffering. Throughout our own lives, we all experience doubt and pain, betrayal and lost opportunity. God tells us, “I will love and honor you forever.” Can we believe this promise? Do we sit reading our own love letters every day, pining away for God to reward our faithfulness? Are we blind like Peter to what God is saying to us as Christians, or can we lean into our suffering, learning to let go of self-interest so God’s plan may reveal itself in due time?

The season of Lent invites us into conversation with God, with Jesus, and with each other. It asks us central questions about our faith, our values, our claim that we are *Christians*.

I wished that person who texted me about our church good luck on their journey of faith. Then I said a silent prayer that Christendom would let go of its ego and its judgments and instead embrace compassion, justice, and community as disciples of the Christ who did not peddle easy answers, scriptural certainty, or ownership cards for the heart of God.

*May It Be So.*

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