

“Following Jesus Is for Losers”

Mark 8:31-38

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Here we are in lovely Caesarea Philippi, in this lectionary cycle – the second Sunday in Lent. Such a picturesque town! What better place for Jesus to get to the point of his life. This is a turning point in the Gospel of Mark. Of the sixteen chapters in Mark, eight focus on Jesus’ Galilean ministry, and eight focus on His march toward the Cross. Up to this point, Jesus was popularly understood to be the incarnation of Elijah, one of the prophets. There was very little evidence for any expectations of “the messiah,” which was hardly a standardized term at the time. But from here on in – the role and title “the Messiah” would fit Jesus’ subsequent actions.

Will you pray with me? Gracious and loving God, as we journey together in faith, fill us with the strength to take up our cross and follow Jesus; that we might come to understand what you intend for us, and that your love and grace be at work in us. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

The passage at hand follows immediately after Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. In Mark, the focus, the turning point in the Gospel, is Jesus’ prediction of His death. This is Jesus’ first of three explicit predictions of His Passion (the other two being 9:31 and 10:33-34). In each instance Jesus makes it clear that He will suffer, be killed, and rise again after three days. Furthermore, in this passage Jesus clearly states that anyone who would be His disciples must prepare to be cross-bearers. What a way to start the day.

From now on, things will be different. Up to this point, we have primarily been challenged to interpret the remarkable power Jesus has displayed. How does He do what He does? What’s the source of His power? And why? But from this moment on, we are forced to wrestle with Jesus’ prediction that suffering and death are on His horizon.

Because we know the end of the story, we tend to jump ahead to the Resurrection. We don’t like the 50 shades of suffering and death part. We want the Hollywood ending. But to do that is to weaken the impact of the struggle Jesus’ words pose for us. To hear Mark accurately, we have to allow the tension to settle in; we have to let the discomfort of Jesus’ words—before the resurrection—confront us. We have to be a follower of Jesus on His way to the cross.

Being a follower is not something we encourage in America. No college or seminary commencement speaker has ever congratulated the graduates on becoming the “followers of tomorrow.” Nobody gives awards to recognize the contributions of community followers. Nobody frames their résumé to highlight where they exercised strong “followership” in their work.

In fact, when “following” comes up at all, it’s usually negative. Don’t be a follower, be a leader. Don’t follow the crowd make your own way. Being a follower is passive. Following is for people who can’t think or act for themselves. Being a follower is for losers.

There is one place I can recall being encouraged to become a follower: Twitter. Twitter is all about following. With Twitter you connect with other people by choosing to “follow” them. You get to as anonymously or as voyeuristically as you want: you receive everything they say through Twitter, so choosing who to follow requires some real thought. Is this person interesting or funny or insightful or

are they just going to tell you what breakfast cereal they had this morning? Whose thoughts and activities do you really want to keep up with?

I have a good friend, Roberta, who is fanatical about Twitter. She loves all the notices, the pictures, the events, the funny stuff – everything about it. Roberta cannot get enough of Twitter. It is fair to mention that she uses a lot of social media - Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, all as a means to help her business. She *is* good at it. One day she texted me that she was following Jesus Christ on Twitter. I texted her back: “what exactly do you meant that you are following Jesus Christ” - on Twitter? I was concerned that she was following some kind of nut.

I still have my concerns, and yet I think that using social media can be exciting. I know of several churches that encourage their community to post to Facebook, or even tweet during the service for those who are following the church on social media. It seems to be working based on the comments I hear and read.

If there had been Twitter in the first century, Jesus (the real Jesus) probably would have been pretty popular. Lots of people wanted to follow him to see what he was doing and hear what he had to say. Jesus has made quite a name for himself. He's been on a streak of healings and exorcisms, feeding lots of people, and performing miracles; he's been saying a lot of things that are sometimes funny, often provocative, and always insightful; and the crowds follow everything he says and does.

But when Jesus tells the disciples that he must suffer, be rejected by the leaders, and die for them – this is the first time they hear this kind of stuff. Peter, confused, again misunderstanding what Jesus meant - took Jesus aside and reprimanded him for saying such things. He says to Jesus: There is a problem with your message – this will not work on Twitter. The message is not a positivist one – not an uplifting one filled with promises of prosperity and protection for those who support this ministry – it is just not the right message. In fact it is the wrong one. “What kind of Messiah is that?” Peter demands. But Jesus cuts him off in startling terms; contrasting the purpose of will of God for human beings with the purposes those human beings would have for themselves. Jesus will be a martyr-messiah.

And then Jesus calls the disciples around Him, He gives them the answer to the question that is on their minds: What kind of Messiah they are following? “If any want to become my followers,” Jesus says, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. He tells them they must be prepared to suffer for telling good news. Money and power do not want to hear it, so be prepared – we speak out! He says that “for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who *lose their life* for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Following Jesus requires a lot more than clicking a button to keep up with him, knowing what he says and does – unless, you are using a Kindle. It means actually going where he goes, and doing what he does - the way that he does it. This is crucial given how the phrase “take up their cross” has been so abused and misconstrued. Usually, when someone says “something or someone” is “my cross to bear,” they mean suffering that is imposed *upon* them must be accepted and endured, often with complaint. No. Jesus is saying that taking up the cross will stretch our faith, to put ourselves in a place where we might lose something. It's being *proactive* about our faith. It is about speaking up and speaking out. It is faith in action.

We do not take up our cross and follow Jesus by quietly accepting the failures of our State Legislature to pass a decent health care bill to help tens of thousands of Tennesseans have options they do not now have, because this state so vocally opted out of Affordable Health Care.

We do not take up our cross to commiserate and just listen while governments, corporations, and individuals cry “Religious Freedom” so that they can legally discriminate against me and my gay sisters and brothers by preventing municipalities in Arkansas and Tennessee and possibly Texas from

enacting laws of fairness and protection against the bullies who would have us live in uncertainty and fear.

We do not take up our cross to give ourselves a pat on the back while states work to undo the Voting Rights Act.

Suffering that is imposed on us against our will is not redemptive. Suffering on the cross was not imposed on Jesus; he took it up himself willingly and intentionally. To take up our cross and follow Jesus means we follow him in refusing to think only about ourselves, but to suffer for the redemption of others even at risks to ourselves.

Jesus plainly said: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it." Yes, following Jesus is for losers; the question is what we are willing to lose? Are we losers at Pilgrim? Are we willing to take up the cross? Are we followers of Jesus? As we journey with Jesus to the cross, we are reminded that the purpose of Lent is to prepare ourselves for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, as well as Easter. As it turns out, we have a lot to lose. So let's get going. All we have to do is follow the leader. Amen.
