

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 9:30-37 (NRSV)

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; [31] for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." [32] But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

[33] Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" [34] But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. [35] He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." [36] Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, [37] "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

THE CLOCK

A church that I served in seminary was founded during the Revolutionary War. It was steeped in tradition. In the cemetery that ringed the church were the graves of old church members who had served and died in battle during that war. There was still a balcony where slaves used to worship "separately but equally" with their masters.

Elders in this church were elected for life, and they were sworn to protect all the traditions of the church. And one of their greatest traditions concerned a clock that was placed right behind the pulpit. It was one of those big clocks like we used to have in school. You can imagine how distracting a clock in that position could be.

Instead of concentrating on the message or the worship service, people were often focused on the clock. They were thinking, "It's five minutes to twelve, and we haven't even made it to the last hymn yet. How can we ever beat the Baptists to Sonny's Restaurant? Someone needs to talk with the pastor."

Believe me. This group was not shy about talking with the pastor and letting the pastor know who was in charge. They told the same story to every pastor who came.

It was about an interim pastor who preached his first sermon in this historic sanctuary. He was very enthusiastic about the building and the people. But, there was one thing he didn't like. He didn't like the clock.

He told the elders. "If I came to this church as its full time pastor, that clock would be the first thing to go." And one of the elderly elders who was also very hard of hearing said to his neighbor in a voice that all could hear, "That wouldn't be the first thing to go!"

He meant it. That was his church. He had been there all his life, and he wasn't about to let anyone change it in the least.

MY CHURCH

We do get possessive about our churches don't we? I often catch myself talking about "my church" as if it is my personal possession. I suspect you might sometimes say the same thing.

There's something good about that. In order for a church to be effective, people need to feel like they are a part of it. People need to feel that they belong, that this truly is "my" church.

But, somewhere along the line belonging changes into ownership, and then the trouble begins. In my home town there was a church called Bailey Memorial Church. As you might expect the Bailey's were influential in the creation of that church. But, years later they changed the name to reflect the location instead of the family. And there was a terrible split in that church.

Some people could no longer say,
"This is my church. Our family name is on this church." And so they quit.

We need to be attached to our church family, but we always need to remember that it is not our church. Indeed, a church is not a building or an institution. A church is a people who are called according to God's purpose as revealed in Jesus.

CALLED TO FOLLOW JESUS

The Greek New Testament word for church is *ekklesia*. It means literally the people who are called out. We are a people who are called out of the world to live in a different way. We march to the beat of a different drummer.

Just as the disciples were called by Jesus to leave their old way of life and follow him, so we are called to leave our old way of life and follow Jesus. The church is not defined by traditions, be they good or bad traditions. The church is not defined by what we think is right or good.

The church is defined by the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is his church, and we are called to follow him. The disciples understood this, and yet they had a hard time accepting the leadership of Jesus.

They found that Jesus was not the leader they expected or even wanted. Instead of placing a clock behind the pulpit, Jesus placed a cross. Instead of making the kingdom all about me and what I want to do with my time Jesus talked about a kingdom based upon suffering and sacrifice.

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

In the chapter that precedes our lesson for today, Jesus asked his disciples a very important question. He asked, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter, answering for all the disciples proclaimed out loud the hope that they had in their heart, "You are the Messiah."

Now that was true. Jesus was the Messiah. But, what was the role of the Messiah? How would that title be defined?

Peter and the rest of the disciples thought that they knew the answer to that question. In their minds the Messiah would be a kind of cross between a military and spiritual leader. In our country we say that there needs to be separation between church and state.

But, that wasn't true in the days of Jesus. The people of Israel didn't long for a democracy. They longed for a theocracy.

Just as Iran and other Muslim countries are trying to base their government and public policy upon their understanding of God and what it means to have faith, so there were many in Jesus' day in wanted to do the same thing.

They believed that the Messiah would be a heroic military figure who would toss the infidels out of their land (in this case the Romans) and establish a new kingdom after the pattern of their greatest king, a man after God's own heart, King David.

This was their country and their faith. And they hoped Jesus would be the one to lead them to victory.

They longed for this new day to dawn, and like the radicals of our day, they were willing to give their lives for the cause. They had left everything to follow Jesus.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF MESSIAH

But, there was a problem. Jesus was not the Messiah they had dreamed about all their lives. Jesus did not take up the mantle of a religious military leader. Jesus did not call upon God to smash his enemies.

Instead, Jesus conceived of the messianic role in terms of a suffering servant. He talked about loving enemies. Salvation would not come at the point of a sword. Instead salvation would come on a cross. Salvation would come when he allowed himself to be mistreated and even crucified by his enemies. (Mark 8:31)

You can understand how Peter would find this to be a very disturbing thing to say. Suppose one of our national leaders had said to us after the attacks of September 11, "In order to save our world we need to learn how to love our enemies and do good to those who harm us. We're going to trust in God for our protection and salvation instead of trusting in military might."

If that happened his advisors would take him aside and say, "Are you crazy? People don't want a senator who is soft on terrorism. Either you talk tougher or we're going to work for the other side."

That's why Peter rebuked Jesus. The Bible tells us that he took him aside and dressed him down like a schoolmaster might talk to a recalcitrant student.

We criticize Peter and the other disciples for their lack of faith, but we need to understand their situation. They really had risked everything to follow Jesus. They had left their homes, their jobs and their families. The disciples were strong courageous men who were willing to fight for their country and their Messiah. And they thought that only brute force would save them from the indignities of foreign domination.

I can understand how they felt. We know what terror feels like on just a small scale. Can you imagine what it would be like if our whole country was controlled by our enemies? We too would pray for a Messiah who would lead us to victory. We too would be willing to risk everything to follow such a leader.

But, suppose we found such a leader and that leader started to talk in ways that we did not expect? Suppose he began to talk like Jesus. Suppose he began to talk about rejection and crucifixion and resurrection.

Chances are our reaction would be the same as Peter's. We would rebuke Jesus. We would say, "I'm sorry Jesus but I didn't sign up for this cross thing. Give me a rifle instead of a cross. At least I might have a fighting chance."

THE CHURCH OF THE THIRD REICH

Not too long ago there were some who made the same argument that Peter made. Their country had been treated unfairly by the rest of the world, at least in their opinion, and there probably was quite a bit of truth to that claim. Stiff penalties had been imposed upon Germany after World War I. And so this country decided to fight back.

In order to do so effectively, the cross bearing religion of Jesus had to be modified considerably to fit the aims of the state. Dr. Reinhold Krause in a speech made the following suggestions for this new church. This church would be more in line with the aims of the state.

He said, "The New Testament needs to be purged of all superstitious passages, including the whole theology of the Rabbi Paul with its ideas of scapegoats and its sense of inferiority. An exaggerated view of the Crucified is to be avoided and a 'heroic' Jesus proclaimed."

The world saw just how demonic the church and society could be when it was willing to exchange the views of God for the views of the world. That's why Jesus told Peter that his rebuke was satanic. The cross was and is necessary.

It is the cross that prevents us from cooperating in a conspiracy of silence with the ways of the world. It is the cross which defines the unique values of the followers of Christ.

THE NECESSITY OF THE CROSS

The cross prevents us from making Jesus into a heroic superman who conquers the enemy or gives us our heart's desire. Jesus was and is the suffering servant. And it is precisely in this willingness of our Messiah to sacrifice for others, to take up a cross and die that resurrection and salvation came into the world.

All true disciples of Jesus must begin their journey at the cross. All true disciples of Jesus must take up their cross and follow him. Taking up the cross does not necessarily mean that we will die for our faith. It can mean that, and there have been many down through history that have paid this ultimate price for their faith.

But, for most of us taking up a cross involves a radical and painful rearranging of our priorities. We have to rethink what it means to be great. Greatness is not owning the cattle on a thousand hills or the condos in a thousand towns. Greatness is not being in charge. Greatness is defined by our willingness to serve others in the name of Christ.

And this service doesn't begin with the rich and powerful. This service begins with the down and out. The cross is the way of downward mobility.

This is still a hard message to preach and an even harder message to practice. The apostle Paul understood the difficulty of preaching the cross. In his letter to the Corinthians he wrote, "... but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." I Corinthians 1:23

COSTLY GRACE

But, the way of the cross is still the only path that leads to salvation. Don't fool yourself. Following Jesus comes with a high price tag.

The most profound words on the cost of discipleship still come from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who stood up to the atrocities of Nazi Germany with the power of the Gospel. In his famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote about the difference between cheap grace and costly grace. He wrote,

“Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without a cross, grace without the incarnate Jesus Christ ... Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again. It is costly because it calls us to discipleship; it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives; it is grace because it gives them their lives.”

How can we learn to embrace this costly grace that God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ? How can we distinguish this true grace from its cheap imitator?

We have to ask ourselves the same question that Jesus asked his disciples. What do we argue about? What stirs our passion? What is our priority in life?

The disciples argued about who would be the greatest in the coming kingdom. Three times Jesus predicts his passion in the gospel of Mark, and all three times these passion predictions are paired with disciples who are more worried about their own glory in the new kingdom than following the way of the cross.

Quite often our priorities are petty and self centered. Like the disciples a true analysis of our life might leave us feeling ashamed. When Jesus asks us what we are talking about we might be unwilling to speak up because we know instinctively that what we are saying is wrong. What hope is there for disciples like us who hear the message over and over and yet continue to get it wrong?

GRACE FOR TIMID DISCIPLES

It should be encouraging for us to know that those first disciples were not abandoned by Jesus. Even through they continued to get it wrong and deny him right up to the time he was crucified, Jesus came back to them and lifted them up.

By the grace of God timid disciples were empowered to act in ways that were contrary to their nature. By the power of the Spirit, the message of the cross and resurrection continues even to this day.

Despite our tendency to think that it's all about us and our needs, we still have hope because our Savior does not leave us to our own selfish ways. He continues to encourage us and call us to a new way of life.

EMBRACING THE LITTLE ONE

Sometimes we don't get the message with words alone. Sometimes, like the disciples we need him to draw us a picture of grace. That's what we have in today's lesson. Jesus put his arms around a little child, and he said to the disciples, “This is what the kingdom of God is all about. It's about embracing a little one.”

Now to understand what Jesus was saying in this action, we need to understand the difference between his culture and ours. In our day childhood is seen as a time of innocence and joy. We often dote on our children, think of them as our future, and provide for their every need.

In Jesus' day they had a different view. In Jesus' day they thought that the best thing about childhood is that one day you will grow out of it. In Jesus' day they thought that children were to be “seen and not heard.” They were at the bottom of the pecking order in society and had absolutely no rights.

But, Jesus came to change all that. Jesus embraced the child. Later in Mark's gospel the people will bring their children to Jesus to be blessed, but the disciples rebuke them and send them away.

Again Jesus in turn rebukes the disciples and affirms the worth of those who are considered the least in society. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

The kingdom of God is about embracing those who are at the bottom of society's ladder.

If you want to be great in God's kingdom, you don't seek to be number one. You seek to be last and a servant of all.

As Jesus embraced a child he told his disciples,

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Mark 9:37 (NRSV)

FINDING CHRIST IN THE LITTLE ONE

In our Bible study this past week someone asked what I thought was a very good question. How could Mother Teresa stand to help so many people who were in such dire straits? What kept her from getting depressed or discouraged?

I think I know the answer to that. She believed that she would find the presence of Christ when she put her arms around a little one. It was not just about helping others. It was about welcoming God into her life.

I remember someone asking Mother Teresa what they could do to help the world, and she said simply, "Love your children." Could it really be that simple? Can we find the presence of God and his kingdom in such a mundane act as this?

According to Jesus we can. According to Jesus, we are called to put our arms around all the "little ones" who come into our life; according to Jesus the compassionate hug can change everything.

It can even turn death into life, cross into resurrection and enemies into friends. Amen.

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