

What Do You Have to Lose?

Mark 8:27-37

February 28, 2021

Lent 2

What was it like for the disciples to follow Jesus during his early ministry, and what might it mean today? For a long time, things went smoothly for the disciples. The pace was exhausting. The crowds were huge. Jesus' popularity was soaring. It was exhilarating, and it was exhausting. What an exciting couple of days it had been!

Earlier in today's chapter, Jesus fed a crowd of over 4,000 people with just seven loaves and a few fish. He put the powerful Pharisees in their place when they tried to confront and stop him. He healed a blind man, not once but twice, so that now the blind man saw clearly.

Then Peter dares to say what had been on his mind -- the possibility that Jesus was sent by God -- that he was the Messiah, the Christ. Yet, even Peter didn't understand the implications and all that this would mean for Jesus. It must have seemed a peculiar time and quite unexpected for Jesus to predict that before long, the religious establishment would reject him. Jesus' ministry was about to change dramatically.

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Our text today marks the half-way point in Mark's gospel -- both literally and spiritually, separating the teaching ministry in Galilee from Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Jesus had been working in Galilee, where the people had for the most part been receptive. Crowds sought him out -- came to him for healing -- hoped to see him work one of the miracles for which he was becoming famous. They said in amazement, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:12).

Galilee is the northern part of what we now call Israel. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in the southern part, near Jerusalem, but Galilee, in the north, is where he was raised. For Jesus, Galilee is familiar territory -- home turf. They lived far from Jerusalem -- far from the temple -- far from the bright lights -- far from the temptations of the city.

The people of Jerusalem were very different -- sophisticated, powerful and educated. The people of Galilee were ordinary country folks by comparison -- people who just wanted to live in peace and raise a family. Jesus got along well with these common, everyday people.

But now Jesus was pushing even further north -- to Caesarea Philippi -- to a different kind of place. It was a place where Gentiles lived -- a place where people worshiped pagan gods . . . a place where there was a temple to Caesar Augustus. This was *not* home territory for Jesus. This was a place where he was an outsider. It was the furthest point north that Jesus would ever travel. Soon he would turn around and begin his journey south -- to Jerusalem -- to the cross, and his final days. It was in this far northern pagan place that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

Bible scholars sometimes refer to this question as THE MESSIANIC SECRET. It is the first of three occasions in Mark where Jesus would predict his suffering and death, but the disciples didn't get it. It would happen again in chapters 9 and 10.

He asked the disciples, "*Who do people say that I am?*" The disciples answered -- "Why some people say you are John the Baptist -- or Elijah -- or one of the prophets." These were good answers, but then Jesus got personal, as he always does. "*Who do you say I am.*" That's a tough question -- a direct question that put the disciples on the spot. For a moment, they were silent. But then Peter -- impetuous Peter -- who was usually the first one to speak, blurted out: "Why you are the Messiah."

The word in Greek is *Christos*. It means "the anointed one," -- the one for whom we have been waiting. Good answer, Peter! He was right on, but there was so much more.

"Jesus began to teach them 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." Mark 8:31

Until now, Mark's gospel has been establishing Jesus' power and authority. But as Jesus and the disciples turn away from Galilee and head towards Jerusalem, a new phase in his ministry is beginning, and he teaches the disciples what to expect -- how he would "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

The disciples would be left alone . . . without a shepherd to lead them. It wasn't what Peter wanted to hear. It isn't what we want to hear. Peter rebuked Jesus. He rebuked the Messiah. Not a good idea! "You aren't going to die, Jesus! That's crazy talk! We won't let you!"

But Jesus quickly rebuked Peter. He said: *"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. And then Jesus invited the crowd to join the disciples, and he said:*

*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." 8:33b-35

Peter dares to say what had been on his mind -- the possibility that Jesus was the greatest person ever sent by God -- that he was the Messiah, the Christ. Yet, even Peter didn't understand the implications and all that this would mean for Christ. Not only does Jesus expect to suffer himself, but anyone who is with him will experience the same. Instead of promising that things will get better for those who follow, Jesus said following him will bring all kinds of trouble. This word is hard for the disciples to hear. This word is hard for most Christians to hear -- both then and now. Nobody likes to hear this talk about bearing crosses very much.

A story is told about this scripture being taught during a Sunday School at a church in the mid-west a number of years ago. The teacher quoted Jesus, saying, *"If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me."* "What do you think this means?" the teacher asked. The class was silent for a while. Then a little girl spoke up with unbridled honesty: "My mother says that my father is the cross *she* has to bear!" Sometimes the truth hurts! Right out of the mouths of children! But on a serious note, everyone has a cross to bear.

These were confusing and demanding words for the disciples to hear. It may be so for us as well. Most of us will not be called upon to suffer and die for what we do in Christ's name. But the question about greatness and identity is part of our fabric and makeup everyday.

Our society seems to covet fame, success and notoriety. Television programs seem to underscore this idea. And how many people play the lottery hope to strike it which? And they think if they do, they're troubles will be over. When it comes to the world, sometimes the more they get, the more they want.

Many people think success is measured by how much money a person makes . . . what they're worth . . . or what position they have achieved on the career ladder. Even in colleges now, competition to get into better schools is extreme as they strive for success and achievement. You no doubt heard the story about the

parents of high school students -- bright, smart students – some of whom lived right here in San Rafael whose parents cheated to jack up their SAT scores in order to get into a top rated school, or paid to get them admitted on a bogus athletic scholarship.

How do you define success? How did Jesus define success? Nearly two thousand years ago, Jesus taught us how to live healthy, fulfilled lives . . . and successful lives according to the gospel. Yet people then and now are still surprised.

Jesus said to Peter and the disciples, *"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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life, or lose their soul,"* as some translations have it. (Mark 8:34-36).

What would it profit, indeed? There is an alternative, Jesus says. What if greatness looked very differently in God's eyes? What if "service" to others was the key to success? What if "worship" replaced "winning at any cost?" And what if following Jesus replaced "following" someone on Facebook or Twitter?

If that happened, I think we might have a brand new world, and we would be on the verge of having a brand new life. Ask people who volunteer at food banks during these days of covid. Ask frontline medical workers who risk their own health in order to care for others. Or teachers who enter the classroom in order that the lives of their students might be enriched. Ask them why they do it.

Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." Maybe what people are missing cannot be found by gaining more of what the world has to offer – but by following the examples offered by Jesus, or Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King.

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Are you becoming the person God created you to be? Are you finding a new life by losing the old? Perhaps letting go of old habits that no longer useful? Are you letting go of past grudges that only brought bitterness, or letting go of negative self-images that would only drag you down? What about grief and anger that has served its purpose? Is it time to let them go? Let them die?

Maybe that's one meaning when Jesus says those who lose their life will find it. In this Lenten season it is worth a try. The only way to save your life in the end is to lose it. It is a mystery we cannot always know, but can always live out. What do *you* have to lose? Amen

Mark 8:27-37

8:27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

8:28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

8:29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

8:30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

8:31 Then he began to teach them 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.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

8:34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

8:35 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.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?