

Mark 8:31-38
February 28, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Many of our recent texts have been difficult to comprehend. They have been open to countless possibilities of interpretation and had embedded deep within them much symbolism. Yet, Jesus' words today are quite the opposite. They are pointedly clear. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. It's what Peter does not yet understand when he confessed in verse 29 just before our passage, "You are the Messiah," referring to Jesus' identity. It is the reason Jesus rebukes him. His sights are still set on human precepts that think glory comes through power. Kingship means Jesus must stay alive, destroy his enemies, and set his followers free. Death seems foolish to Peter and most likely to the other disciples. He cannot yet comprehend Jesus' words that he will rise in 3 days. I am not sure Peter, and the others are yet able to process what carrying one's cross means. It is probably why Jesus tells them to not yet disclose his identity. Because, until the cross and resurrection, they cannot fully understand his identity.

We do know. Jesus' words are clear. Whether we like it or not. Whether we want to talk about it or not. We might say it is too depressing or just give us the pep-talk sermon that makes us feel all warm and cozy inside. It is a struggle to think the way of God does include the way of suffering. The way to finding life is to deny oneself. To follow Jesus means to get behind Jesus. As Eugene Peterson's interpretation of this passage in *The Message* states,

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.¹

With that said, we do not glorify suffering or death and to suffer for the sake of the gospel, to carry one's cross, must not be interpreted to mean one must

endure the abuse of another in a relationship that is intended to give life, love, support, and encouragement.

If we look at the whole of Mark's gospel, Jesus is intent on bringing and giving life. His ministry and mission time and time again, the kingdom he proclaims, is about healing and wholeness. It is about restoring relationships with God broken by sin and death. Jesus dies because he will not stray from God's will to proclaim that good news to all in need of it. Jesus knows his message will be met with resistance. He knows what going to Jerusalem will mean and the fate he will experience there. Yet, he also knows his messiahship does not end in suffering and death. His messiahship is rooted in life. Resurrection life. Eternal life.

Getting behind Jesus. Letting Jesus lead. Losing ourselves. We know it is not easy. We know carrying the cross might lead to pain. Yet, it always leads to love for another. It always means putting to death our ego, pride, greed, and selfish ways. God, in Jesus, suffers because humanity suffers. He came to serve, not be served. He came to show a love that gives, even to the point of death.

By the time Mark's gospel came into existence, many of the original disciples of Jesus, including Peter, had become martyrs – dying because of their confession of and faith in Jesus Christ. Mark's community had lived through the great persecution brought upon by Emperor Nero. Certainly, they had heard stories of the martyrdom of many of those first disciples, of Jesus' half-brother James, and most likely had fellow brothers and sisters in Christ within their own community who bore their cross literally to the point of death in following Jesus.

Indeed, while unfamiliar and in our society, unlikely to occur, martyrdom and persecution are all too real for many Christians across the globe. When we think of what it means to "carry our cross" as Jesus speaks of, martyrdom may be the first thing we think of. Our mind might go to some of those early disciples, or perhaps the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who died just days before WWII came to an end as he stood up against the oppressive powers of Nazism that culminated in millions of deaths of Jewish men and women, among others. Or, we might think of the great civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. Indeed, each of these and so many more carried the cross of Christ in their fight

to proclaim the gospel. To stand up to ways, systems, structures, individuals, and very present evil forces that sought to dehumanize, oppress, bring death, seep hatred into society and seek self-preservation at all costs. They are great models of faith we all look toward.

“Yet,” as Lamar Williamson Jr. points out, “Not all who have understood are giants or martyrs.”ⁱⁱ Or, as Fred Craddock once pointed out in an address to pastors, the reality for most Christians in this country is seldom a life-and-death matter, stated:

We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table – “Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.” But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there... Usually giving our life to Christ isn’t glorious. It’s done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time.ⁱⁱⁱ

I once came across a story, that I am not sure is true or not. Nor, did it tell us if the two people in the story are Christian or not; however, I do believe it is a portrait of what Jesus is hinting at in our text.

One of the characters in the story explains 20 years ago he was a taxicab driver who was called to pick up someone in the middle of the night. Upon arrival, he found himself outside a dark building with only a single light on in a ground floor unit. Many drivers would have honked once or twice and then left if there was no response. Yet, aware many impoverished people relied upon taxis as their only means of transportation and sensing this situation posed no danger he got out and went to the door and knocked as the person on the other side may be someone who needed his assistance. From behind the door came a frail, elderly voice that stated, “Just a minute” and then he heard the sound of something being dragged across the floor. Finally, after a long pause the door opened and a small woman in her 80’s stood before him with a small suitcase. She asked if he would take her suitcase, which he did and placed it in the cab and then returned to assist the woman down off the curb and into the car.

Once in the car the elderly woman gave him an address and then asked if they could drive through downtown. This was not the quickest route to her destination the cab driver explained and thus would make the trip more costly; but the woman indicated she was in no hurry and explained she was on her way to hospice. She did not have any family left and the doctor had told her she did not have much time left. This, more than likely, would be her last ride and she wanted to savor it.

The cab driver quietly reached over and shut off the meter and asked the frail woman in the backseat what route she would like to take and for the next two hours they drove through the city and she showed him the building she had once worked in, the neighborhood she and her husband had lived in, and even the furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl.

At other times, she would simply sit in the backseat saying nothing and her eyes glistening with tears. As the sun began to crease over the horizon she suddenly said, "I'm tired. Let us go now." They drove to the hospice facility and she asked what she owed for the ride. The cab driver said nothing. She said that he had to make a living, but he replied that there were other passengers and with that he squeezed her hand and the door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life.

That driver did not pick up any more passengers that shift but rather drove around aimlessly lost in thought until he came to the understanding, he did not think he had done anything more important in his life than what he just experienced. A routine call in the middle of the night that caught him utterly by surprise and it appears gave him life in the face of death. A beautifully wrapped moment he cherished 20 years later.^{iv}

When I envision the future of our congregation, one that comes down the mountain with Jesus, this is what I envision. A community of love that accompanies another in their time of need. A community of love that loses ourselves aimlessly lost in thought at times and centers ourselves yet again on whose we are and what we are called to be. A community of love that shuts the meter off for a while, is not concerned about how we are going to pay the bills, how many children we have in worship, whether or not it's appropriate to only sing 2 hymns instead of 3, speak the "other" version of the Lord's Prayer, or look

only to what has been and not look to what it can be if we truly let Jesus lead, admit we are not in the driver's seat. It is not that some of these things are unimportant and that we do not have to consider, but they all too easily can lead to a way of maintenance rather than mission. They all too easily lead to a way that serves only our needs, rather than serves the needs of the other.

That is not to say our congregation has not and is not already doing some of these things. We are and I know you are in your daily lives. You are carrying your cross as you care for an aging parent or a spouse with a terminal illness. You are carrying your cross when you deliver a meal to a brother or sister in their time of grief and loss. You are carrying your cross when you speak words of love. Words that encourage and build up. Words that give life. You are carrying your cross in all the 25 and 50 cent acts of love that you do, and no one sees them. Yet, like the cab driver above, they make a huge impact on the other and ultimately, make a huge impact on us. When we know who Jesus is. Truly is in serving the other. In giving his life. In rising to new life. It is then and only then we discover who we are. Created in God's image. Created to love because God first loved us.

ⁱ Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group."

ⁱⁱ Williams Jr., Lamar; *Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teach and Preaching Mark*; John Knox Press, 1983; p. 156.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The New Interpreter's Bible Volume VIII*; 1995 Abingdon Press; p. 629.

^{iv} <https://www.weboflove.org/060309cabride>