

If You Want to Follow Christ - Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Mark 8:27-38

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When you read a novel, especially mysteries, there is sometimes a point at which the direction of the book turns and begins heading towards its conclusion. You may not realize it at that moment, but there might be hints that tell you what is coming or how things will resolve themselves for the characters.

In some ways that it what happens with our text for today from the Gospel of Mark. We are at the center of Mark's writing – both physically and theologically.

Prior to today's text, Mark has been explaining Jesus' teaching and healing ministry. After today's text, we find Jesus and his disciples journeying towards Jerusalem and Jesus' death and resurrection.

With this passage we encounter critical questions about Jesus and about his followers.

Hear Mark 8:27-38,

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?" ²⁸ And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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

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. 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. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”ⁱ

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God.

There are three parts to this passage. We begin with Jesus' question about his identity, then we move to Jesus' teaching about his impending death and resurrection, and we conclude with Jesus' instructions on what it means to follow him.

It seems quite natural after having spent so much time teaching and healing for a conversation about who people say that Jesus is. It is Peter's confession and subsequent misunderstanding that drives this text.

After the disciples have given some answers to Jesus' initial question, Jesus asks them "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter, speaking on behalf of the disciples, says "You are the Messiah." Jesus then orders them to tell no one.

That might seem to be a surprising order, until we see in a few minutes, that Peter does not really know what Jesus being the Messiah means.

Right after Peter's confession of Jesus being the Messiah, Jesus begins teaching them - preparing them – that he, Jesus, will suffer at the hands of the religious and civic authorities and be killed. He also mentions that he will be raised in three days, but the disciples (at least Peter) seem to not hear that part.

Peter is so upset that the Messiah is to suffer, that he takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. The word we translate rebuke here is the same word that Jesus uses of in his commands to demons and to still the storm.

Peter's actions are such that under normal circumstances he would be showing and exercising superiority and authority over Jesus. Jesus however, rebukes Peter right back.

Verse 33 says,

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.”

Jesus does not mince words.

Calling Peter “Satan” is Jesus calling him the Tempter – for that is a synonym for Satan.

Lamar Williamson, Jr., whom I have found particularly useful for this Sermon, in his commentary on Mark, says of the idea of temptation here,

Jesus is tempted (and so are we) to think that God’s anointed can avoid suffering, rejection, and death; that God’s rule means power without pain, glory without humiliation. This is Peter’s way of thinking; and Jesus, overcoming this tempting suggestion, identifies it as a devil of an idea.ⁱⁱ

Not only does Jesus avoid the temptation to walk away from his path, but Jesus also uses this moment to remind Peter and the other disciples of the place of those who follow him – behind him and after him (in verses 33 and 34).

A disciple is one who follows the teacher.

A disciple is one who tries to live like their teacher.

And that transitions us to the third part of today’s passage.

In verses 34-38 Jesus explains what it costs to be a follower of his,

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. 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. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Quoting Williamson again,

The invitation to follow, first extended to Peter and three others beside a sunny sea (1:16-20), is now redefined in the shadow of a cross. Peter and all the others must be asked again if they really want to follow Jesus.ⁱⁱⁱ

Let’s think about this for a moment.

What does it mean to deny oneself and take up their cross and follow Christ?

“The cross Jesus invites his hearers to take up refers not to the burdens life imposes from without but rather to painful, redemptive action voluntarily undertaken for others.”^{iv}

Our cross is to follow in the ways of Christ – even so far as to give up our life for others.

If you want to follow Christ, it is not the various burdens of life that you must be willing to carry, it is actually the giving up of your life for the sake of Jesus.

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I love how Williamson puts this,

“Here to be a Christian is to follow Jesus on his costly way in an imitation of Christ that brushes aside the pieties usually associated with that phrase and goes for the jugular of life itself.”^v

There is nothing, nothing, simple or easy about following Christ.

How Jesus explains this is laid out in the next four phrases.

- 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?
- Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

- Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

There is nothing, nothing, simple or easy about following Christ.

Following Jesus Christ is costly.

Following Jesus Christ is demanding.

Following Jesus Christ requires a commitment – a commitment that needs to be re-made daily.

For those of us who have been Christ followers for any length of time, we may get into a pattern of how we live out our faith. And that pattern, at least for me, often involves becoming comfortable with our faith.

Think about Peter. Peter has proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, but he misunderstands what that word means. Peter most likely is expecting the Messiah to be a military figure that will overthrow Roman rule and re-establish the Davidic monarchy over Israel.

Jesus redefines Messiah as the suffering servant.

Jesus redefines Messiah as the one who gives up his life for the many.

In verse 31, Jesus is very specific about what will happen to him “...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.”

This is where the rubber meets the road for Christ-Followers.

Looking at Peter as a template for us, Williamson says,

Precisely those who profess faith in Jesus as the Christ are the ones who misunderstand his mission and who must now be asked again if they really want to follow him.... Who Jesus is and what he does are intimately related to who his disciples are and what will be required of them.^{vi}

Being a follower of Christ is not meant to be comfortable. And yet, we have often made it so that we are comfortable.

Being a follower of Christ means that we put the **needs** of others ahead of our **wants**.

I cannot tell you what being a follower of Christ looks like for you.

I can tell you that you need to consider that you, like Peter, have an understanding of Jesus' mission that is not 100% correct.

It is possible, that many of us here fall into the category of those who profess faith in Jesus as the Christ being the ones who misunderstand his mission and who must now be asked again if they really want to follow him.

Do you really want to follow Christ?

- Perhaps you are being asked to serve your neighbors at the Samaritan Center;
- perhaps you are being asked to increase your financial giving;
- perhaps you are being asked to volunteer your time and your talents at a local school in some way;
- perhaps you are being asked to serve this upcoming year as a Elder or a Deacon.
- Perhaps you are being called to serve God differently than you ever have before.

Do you really want to follow Christ?

Hear this Invitation to Follow^{vii},

Abandon the illusion you're a self-contained individual.
Be a part of this wounded world,
and find yourself with Christ.

Set aside your own desires,
give yourself fully for others;
be the hands and heart of Jesus.

Renounce self-protection,
accept your brokenness,
and reach out for love.

Let go of your own plans.
Join in the healing of the world.
You will not be alone.

Follow your soul, not your ego.
Follow it right into people's suffering.
Follow it right into the heart of God.

Pour yourself out;
let the world pour in;
then you are one with the Beloved.

ⁱ Scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible are copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and are used by permission.

ⁱⁱ "Mark 8:27-9:1." *Mark*, by Lamar Williamson, John Knox Press, 1983, p. 153.

ⁱⁱⁱ Williamson, pg. 154.

^{iv} Williamson, pg. 154.

^v Williamson, pp. 154-155.

^{vi} Williamson, p. 151.

^{vii} Written by Steve Garnaas-Holmes and posted on Unfolding Light. <https://www.unfoldinglight.net/>. Found at: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/search/label/Proper%2019%20B>.