

Straight Talk
October 28, 2012
Mark 8:31-38

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

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. 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."

A recruiter for Teach for America—a program that recruits bright, young people from college campuses to teach in America's most deprived school systems—once came to visit Duke University. To an auditorium full of Duke students she said, "Looking at you tonight, I don't know why I'm here. I can tell looking at you that you're bound for bright futures, success. And here I stand, trying to recruit you for a salary of \$15,000 a year in some of the worst schools in America, begging you to waste your life for a bunch of ungrateful kids in the backwoods of Appalachia or inner city Philadelphia. I must have been crazy to come here. But I do have some literature up here, and I would be willing to talk to anybody who happens to be interested. The meeting is over." An amazing number of students went forward, dying to give themselves to something bigger and more important than their own selves.

<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Finding-Losing-Life-Alyce-McKenzie-09-11-2012?offset=1&max=1>

This year, Teach for America had 48,500 applicants for its program. I imagine there were twice that many parents, paying \$200,000 or more for their child's college degree saying, "You want to do what?"

In our passage for today Jesus is recruiting with a similar message – only we have heard it so many times we forget how crazy it is. "If you want to follow me," he said, "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow." In other words, give your life away to something bigger than you. Give your passion, your love, your time, your energy to divine things – risk rejection, suffering, frustration, discouragement for divine things and in so doing you will find life.

It's counterintuitive. It's not how we think. We've been brainwashed since childhood with this dream called the "good life," and it looks nothing like an inner city classroom and it certainly does not look like a cross. And yet, Jesus lays out this crazy offer, and crazy people say, "yes!" People walk away from promising careers – wealthy families - lucrative jobs – and risk it all because they want to live; because they want to make a difference.

Peter isn't too sold on the idea. He can say with his mouth, "Jesus is the messiah," but he doesn't have a clue what it really means. What he has in his head is a messiah that is going to make everything go Peter's way – a messiah that is going to make life easier for Peter – a messiah that is going to lead everyone to a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. So when Jesus tells Peter it's not a pot of gold but rather a cross Peter says, "Get out of here! No way!" In a stern voice, Jesus shuts Peter down, and tells him to "listen up" along with the others.

That's when he spells it out for them. This is not a cakewalk to glory – this is the way of the cross. Jesus isn't going to ride into Jerusalem on a white horse and fix everything from the top down. No, he is going to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and show us how to stand up for others – and he is going to be rejected, killed and rise again. It's going to look like everything Jesus did and stood for was a colossal waste of time and effort punctuated with humiliating defeat. But on the third day – on the third day – everyone will see that this is the way – the truth – and the life.

The disciples had a hard time with this – they didn't get it. In fact, people still don't get it. We've turned the cross into our ticket to the pearly gates. We've been led to believe that Jesus did all the suffering for us to appease and angry God. But that is not the cross Jesus is talking about when he says, "If you want to follow me...you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow." Jesus is talking about the persecution and the rejection one faces when he or she lives and applies the teachings of Jesus.

In January, when I return to school, I will be taking a class on the history of women and religion in America. In preparation for that class I am reading a thick book of history titled, "You have Stept out of your Place." With each page I am humbled and grateful for women who gave their lives to follow Jesus by serving their neighbor and standing up for the least and the last; women who advocated for the poor immigrant women working under horrendous conditions in the textile industry; women who organized mission societies to serve and educate the poor; women who fought against prostitution and sympathized with women victimized by this practice; women who spoke out when told to sit down and shut up; women who gave up families and became nurses and teachers to serve the least of these. You won't find their names in most history books, but their devotion to the teaching of Jesus led them to make history. You can bet their mothers and fathers were saying, "You want to do what?"

In September, our camp and conference center closed its camping season with a camp for seniors (not seniors in high school but retirees). The keynote speaker for the camp was Johnny Wray. Johnny was the director of our Week of Compassion ministry for many years and he came to speak on the subject of compassion. A woman from Dave's congregation came home from that experience frustrated. What she heard was that compassion is more than acts of charity – it is more than writing a check every now and then; it is more than buying dinner for a homeless person; it is more than providing school supplies for impoverished children. Compassion, Johnny taught, asks: why people are poor, homeless, and hungry. Compassion challenges us to courageously deal with the root causes of these problems and often times the work of compassion is political. In the church, this form of compassion is often called social justice.

Now I'm not sure why this woman came home so disappointed but I do know that a lot of church folk don't want much to do with social justice. I do know that it is easier to throw up your hands and accept things as they are. I do know that it is more comfortable to let someone else deal with big social issues and ills. It is enough to worry about our own problems and take care of ourselves.

But Jesus isn't asking us to take the easy road. Jesus isn't suggesting that we be comfortable. "If you want to follow me – deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow."

Why on earth would anyone say, "Yes?"

Why would 48,500 promising college graduates give up two years to help children rise out of poverty?

Because that is what people do when they set their mind on divine things. People make sacrifices and act with courage when they start to care about the concerns of God. To deny oneself and take up one's cross is to choose to take on Jesus' burden for others no matter the cost.

You might not ever start a movement or champion a cause...choosing to care, choosing to love, choosing to get involved, choosing to act, choosing to serve...is to choose Jesus. It's not easy or comfortable, but it is where you will find God.

Amen.