

## The Way of the Cross

Mark 8:27-36

*"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."*

As the disciples and Jesus are walking along, Jesus asks them what they've been hearing about him. They report various rumors and speculations about his identity. Then Jesus puts the question to them: Who do YOU say that I am? Peter jumps right in. He's like that kid in the class you could not stand. Always had his hand in the air whenever the teacher asked a question. "You are the Messiah," says Peter. You are the one God has sent to save us, to show us the way. The church has called this the "good confession," and has made it the gateway to Christian faith and life. It is our recognition and affirmation that God's love and presence are fully present to us in Christ, and that following him is the path to true life.

Instead of praising Peter for his insight, however, Jesus tells the disciples to say nothing about it to anyone. The church has never known quite what to make of this. It is much easier to tell folks to go out and talk about Jesus. Full of evangelistic zeal, missionaries and ordinary church folks go forth to tell other people that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. This is often accompanied by the judgment that other spiritual traditions or practices are wrong.

It is easy to talk about Jesus. We put his name on t-shirts, bumper stickers, billboards...pretty much all over the place. But here Jesus has just told Peter and the others to say nothing to anyone about who he is. This is not the only place he says such a thing. It is all through the gospel of Mark, and in some places in the other gospels as well. We may not know exactly what this means, but it is worth exploring why it might be important to NOT talk about Jesus. There are some hints in the rest of the story.

Jesus next tells the disciples that the messiah will take the path of suffering and of rejection by those who hold religious and political power. He will be killed, and then raised after three days. The crucifixion stands for Jesus' complete oneness with God's loving purposes for life. The harmony of his life with God's purposes ran counter to the purposes of those holding religious and political power. They responded with violence, which is always a sign of insecurity. Jurgen Moltmann, in his book The Crucified God, puts it this way: *Jesus was folly to the wise, a scandal to the devout and a disturber of the peace in the eyes of the mighty. That is why he was crucified. If anyone identifies with him, this world is 'crucified' to him, as Paul said. He[or she]becomes alienated from the wisdom, religion and power politics of his[or her]society.* That's the cross of Jesus, the one he bore for all humankind, showing us the path of true life, of union with God and God's purposes. It is a path that will include suffering and struggle because it is in tension with much of life around us, including much "religious" life. And it is in tension with much of the way we have been acculturated, the ways we have been taught to see and live our lives.

This is all too much for Peter, who takes Jesus aside. "Uh, Teacher, we need to talk. What do you mean, suffering? What do you mean, rejection and being killed?" Peter probably thought Jesus had flipped out. This is negative, defeatist stuff. People wanted a messiah who would throw off the yoke of Rome and restore their standing and respectability. Nationalism and religion—we know that story today. Peter is probably of the school that pictured the Messiah bringing people success, power, national restoration. Who in the world is going to buy into suffering, rejection, and death?!

Jesus doesn't talk about doing away with suffering, but embracing and passing through suffering. The drive to avoid discomfort is strong in us. It leads us into all sorts of difficulties and neuroses. We try to bury our hurts and pains only to find them growing in intensity. We avoid uncomfortable things in or around ourselves. We try to construct for ourselves a life that is "care free," isolating ourselves behind walls of affluence and materialism. Yet this leaves us spiritually and emotionally empty.

Years ago I had the privilege of driving Mr. Elie Wiesel from the Roanoke airport to Lynchburg College for a lecture. He, as you know, is a Nobel laureate whose novels and other writings explore the horrors of the Holocaust and its continuing effects on the human spirit. He was fifteen when he was taken to the death camps, where he lost his family. His experience has given him a keen sense of what is important and what is frivolous.

As we drove into Lynchburg, we passed a sign advertising an upscale housing complex. It proclaimed: “Who says you can’t have it all?” Mr. Wiesel spotted the sign and said in his quiet voice, “That is what is wrong with us.” What he meant, I think, is that we live in a culture dominated by the illusion of a suffering-free, pain-free life, and we will do nearly anything to hold onto that illusion.

Jesus now makes public what Peter whispered in private. He reprimands Peter in front of the disciples. You are not thinking of life in relation to God, but only on the human level. Then he addresses the disciples and others who have gathered, which, I think, includes us: *If any want to be 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 gospel, will save it.* Now Jesus is talking about our cross, living our own lives out of our relationship with God and God's purposes. There is a clear sense in the gospels that Jesus as the messiah of God saves us, not by doing it FOR us, but by opening up the way for us to follow. It is the wisdom of the old spiritual: *Jesus walked this lonesome valley; he had to walk it by himself. Nobody else could walk it for him; he had to walk it by himself.* Then it says: *You've got to walk that lonesome valley; you've got to walk it by yourself. Nobody else can walk it for you; you've got to walk it by yourself.*

The first step is self-denial. Here I want to be very careful. When we talk about self-denial or dying to ourselves or suffering, we need to recognize that much neurosis has resulted from wrong approaches to this very important spiritual reality. Self-denial isn't self-hatred or ignoring our human needs. It isn't self-destructive attitudes or behavior. It isn't wiping out our sense of identity or dignity. Jesus means losing one self and finding another self, letting go of one kind of life and finding a new kind of life. It is turning outward from oneself to find a greater and wider belonging to life than just to our own needs and wants.

Jesus is talking about the false self that has turned away from God and neighbor. It is the self that is under the illusion that we exist independently of the rest of life and of God. There is a Buddhist concept I have found very helpful in understanding the nature of the self-denial Jesus teaches. It is the concept of “emptiness,” and has been misunderstood and misrepresented by Western religion and thought. Emptiness means being empty of a separate existence. We try to build our identities on individualism and the assumption that we are each separate lives that simply bump into each other like marbles, that we live in a world that we also simply bump into and use as we wish. Becoming aware that we are “empty of a separate existence” means seeing we are related to everyone and everything in the universe. How can I say I am separate when I am the product of my parents' physical, emotional, and spiritual union? How can I say I am separate when I am sustained every day by water, food and air, which in turn are the products of natural and human interrelationships? How can I say that I am separate when so many people have nurtured and nourished my life and spirit? When I understand that I am “empty of a separate existence,” I find a more real and joyful awareness of my life as interrelated and interdependent. I am not the center of the universe! I am literally not alone! Self-denial is no problem! That self simply does not exist.

Years ago I visited a church member who was hospitalized for a serious condition. She had always been what we call “independent.” She tended to hold herself back and apart, closing off her inner life from others. Now in a situation of dependency, she found herself open and receptive to the visits from others in the congregation. One day she told me that she had never before understood what being part of a community of love and care was about and why it was so important. Her old self was dying; a new self was emerging, a healthier, more whole self, connected at a deep level to others.

Taking up our cross and denying our selves means intentional suffering, the suffering or difficulty that we encounter as we share in God's redemptive love for the world. It is not suffering for suffering's sake. Following Jesus does not mean we think up every way we can be unhappy or always in conflict with something or someone. It is the suffering that results from being faithful to our truest self, to who and what we most deeply feel God calls us to be and do. We leave our “comfort zones” in order to meet a stranger, to welcome someone who may feel alone. We decide to live toward material simplicity out of respect for others, the earth, and to be more focused on what truly matters in life. We reach beyond our judgmentalism and habitual viewpoints and try to grow in deeper understanding of others. We move out in some ministry to meet the needs of people and the creation. Such movements in our lives bring a kind of suffering. They stir up and unsettle us, inwardly and outwardly. They bring difficulties and struggles. But they expand and deepen our capacity to love. This kind of cross-carrying keeps us growing in the knowledge that we are “empty of a separate self,” the process of dying to the old, unsatisfying life, and being born into the new life of our true identity as those whom God has made.

These kinds of cross-carrying are at the root of every ministry and mission, every effort and action of this community over the decades of our life. Some things have lived on and taken root. Some have foundered and withered away. Some fulfilled their purposes and ended. There are probably more missions that did not survive than those that did. But that is not the point. The important thing is that through a commitment to a disciplined life of faith and to being part of a community of God's love in Jesus, we endeavor to remain on the path of self-denial and cross-carrying, the inward path of dying to the old self and being born to the new self, and the outward path of living out God's love in and toward the world.

All of this stuff is not pat and easy. I think that might be part of why Jesus told Peter and the disciples not to say anything to anyone. It is so easy to misunderstand this life, to talk about it too cleverly and eloquently, without LIVING it, which is what Jesus calls us to do. I read an interview with Henri Matisse years ago. When asked what he thought about artists who talk about their work, he made a cutting motion with his fingers: "They should have their tongues cut out!" Better to paint than to talk about painting. Better to live the life of faith than talk about it. Kosuke Koyama, a Japanese Methodist pastor and theologian, has a wonderful essay entitled "No Handle on the Cross." The cross Jesus asks us to pick up and carry, Koyama says, is not like a lunchbox or attaché case, with a convenient handle. The lunchbox or attaché case is a symbol of efficiency and sufficiency. We can carry them smartly down the street as we go our way. The cross, however, is something heavy and cumbersome. No one can carry a cross and look efficient or impressive. The cross is carried, dropped, picked up again. One doesn't look graceful and efficient in the world's view carrying such a thing. There is no handle on the cross. But as we carry this cross of God's love day by day, endeavoring to meet each person or situation with God's love, learning little by little what it really means to deny ourselves, to die to the old self and be born to a new self, we find that we are on the road to new life, the path toward resurrection. Not somewhere in the distant future or in some far-off heaven, but now in each precious moment of life, here on this precious earth, God's good creation, with these precious lives of ours.

Wendell Berry has a poem called "Amish Economy," which contains these words:

*We live by mercy if we live.  
To that we have no fit reply  
But working well and giving thanks,  
Loving God, loving one another,  
To keep Creation's neighborhood.*

*And my friend David Kline told me,  
"It falls strangely on Amish ears,  
This talk of how you find yourself.  
We Amish, after all, don't try  
To find ourselves. We try to lose  
Ourselves"--and thus are lost within  
The found world of sunlight and rain  
Where fields are green and then are ripe,  
And the people eat together by  
The charity of God, who is kind  
Even to those who give no thanks.*

(A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997)