

25 February 2024

Why Do We Follow Christ, Anyway?

Mark 8:27-38

Our Gospel reading today is from Mark, chapter 8, verses 27-38.

²⁷Jesus 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?’ ²⁸And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ ²⁹He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.’

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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 couple of weeks ago, on Transfiguration Sunday, when I was preaching about . . . um . . . the Transfiguration, I mentioned that that revelation happened right after a key turning point in the Gospel of Mark. Well, this is that turning point: Peter’s confession of Christ at Caesarea Philippi. After Peter correctly identified him as the Messiah, Jesus stepped up his training of the disciples, revealing himself to them in new ways. Today I want to look more closely at that confession, and more deeply at what Jesus began teaching his followers then.

Because his teaching changed. In the first half of Mark, we see Jesus taking his disciples with him everywhere, and they get to hear him teach the crowds all day. But that teaching nearly all comes in the form of enigmatic stories and parables, and is about the nature of God and God’s kingdom. What Jesus does *not* do is talk about himself: who he is or what he is on earth for. In fact – as I noted two weeks ago – he doesn’t let *anyone* do that. When he casts out demons, they all seem to know who he is, but Jesus hushes them up and won’t let them speak. Clearly, Jesus doesn’t want to tell even his closest followers who he is; he wants them to figure it out for themselves. And so, at Caesarea Philippi, he decides to give them a sort of midterm test: Who do people say I am? All right. Those are some interesting options. Now, who do *you* think I am? And Peter, probably the last person I’d expect to ace the test, gets it right: “You are the Messiah.”

And immediately Jesus begins teaching something completely new. Verse 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.* To

understand just how dramatically new and different this is, you have to remember what “Messiah” meant. It’s the Hebrew word for “Anointed One,” and at that time was used to refer to the promised king from the royal line who would be a new David. And who was David? He was the great guerrilla fighter and general who, once he became king of Israel, conquered all the surrounding nations to establish for the first and only time an Israelite Empire. David was the Jews’ Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, William the Conqueror, George Washington, Napoleon. When the Jewish people, chafing under Roman rule, talked about a “Messiah,” that was what they had in mind. But immediately after Peter identifies him as the “Messiah,” Jesus says: You’re right. And as Messiah, I’m going to suffer, be humiliated and rejected, and be killed, before rising again.”

In other words, “I’m the Messiah; just not that one.”

Peter tries to hush Jesus up and put an end to that sort of discouraging talk, and he gets his knuckles rapped for it, but there’s no sign that any of Jesus’ other disciples are any more receptive to the idea of a suffering Messiah. As we continue to read through Mark, we will see Jesus try two more times to explain to his disciples what he has actually come to do, and each time they continue to miss the point. They get the Messiah part, but they don’t accept the rest. Maybe that’s understandable: it’s a hard, unwelcome concept.

And it gets harder, because Jesus doesn’t just say that *he’s* going to suffer, he then tells them that they need to be ready to do so as well. Verse 34: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* The cross, of course, was not a theme for jewelry in those days. The cross represented a humiliating, painful death. And just in case that isn’t clear enough, Jesus spells it out: *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.* He’s been speaking in parables and enigmatic proverbs up to this point. Now, whether his disciples like it or not, he’s speaking plainly. Be prepared to die for me. That’s what following me means.

That’s still a hard, unwelcome concept, isn’t it? What do we do with that? Here’s one option: ignore it. There have been some recent news articles about Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston. It’s been in the news because of a shooting – another person with mental illness and a legally obtained automatic weapon – but let’s look at this church for a moment. It is a church dedicated to ignoring this hard teaching of Jesus. Lakewood is a massive congregation, meeting in the former Houston Rockets arena, able to seat some 16,000 people per service and holding three services every weekend. Just in terms of their physical offerings, not counting online gifts, they collect more than a million dollars a week. Grammy-award winning musicians lead their worship, playing relentlessly upbeat praise choruses, and Joel Osteen himself offers a relentlessly upbeat message on positive thinking. Each week, all congregants repeat this mantra, “I am blessed, prosperous, redeemed, forgiven, healthy, whole, talented, creative, confident.” Osteen assures them that God is just waiting to bless each of them with material wealth, just as soon as they believe it enough. For proof, just look at Osteen himself: he believed it, and now he’s fabulously wealthy. Praise Jesus.

So anyway, that’s one way to deal with Jesus’ hard, unwelcome teaching about bearing a cross: teach the exact opposite. Teach that faith in Jesus will lead to comfort, security, and wealth. Clearly there’s a market for that message, but most of us Christians are uncomfortable just flagrantly contradicting Christ. But we’re also uncomfortable with Jesus’ hard teaching, so what can we do? Well, many do this: they don’t deny Jesus’ words, but rather define them

downwards. They diminish them. When Jesus talks about taking up your cross, he means “follow me to death”: when we say “that’s the cross I have to bear” we’re talking about our arthritic left knee or our irritating co-worker. See what I mean? We’re still suffering; just not much. Or again, Jesus warns his disciples that they will face persecution, which in ancient Rome meant imprisonment or torture; Christians today still talk about “persecution” but now it means “receiving marginally less respect than we used to.” So let me just say this: When someone says “Happy Holidays” to you in December instead of “Merry Christmas,” that’s not actually persecution. That’s what is called a polite greeting. Respond accordingly. When a multinational overpriced coffee chain chooses not to celebrate the birth of Christ on their December cup design, that’s not persecution. That’s actually a good thing. Frankly, Christ is not glorified by an branding agreement with Starbucks.

I could go on, but you get my point. In America today, there are loud voices declaring that Christians have become a persecuted minority, because we no longer have public Christian prayers before high school football games or because school districts sometimes schedule things on Wednesday nights without asking us first. But that’s not persecution. Jesus never promised that we would have a privileged place in society. In fact, he promised the opposite. What Jesus promised that day at Caesarea Philippi is that if we follow him, if we shape our lives according to his teaching and example, we are going to be outsiders. We are going to be seen as a challenge to whatever the dominant society is, and society will set out make us uncomfortable.

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus set out to make sure the disciples knew what they were getting into, perhaps giving them the chance to leave if they wanted. They didn’t. So what about us? Why do we follow Christ, anyway? If it’s because our parents were Christian and we were raised in the church, that’s not really enough. Jesus clearly expected more of his followers than that. If it’s because Christianity is the dominant faith in our society and offers certain benefits to its members, that’s not following Christ. That’s following our best interest. Jesus says that following him will be hard. So why do we do it? Here’s the reason. In Jesus of Nazareth, we have glimpsed flashes of eternity. We have discovered in the depth and breadth of his love a purpose and a hope that is larger than this world. We will not let go of that. Whatever happens to us: lost privileges, lost security, lost comfort, lost life, we will *not* let go. We follow Christ because once we have started on that path, everything else feels empty.