



“The Challenge”
Scripture – Mark 8:27-38
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 16, 2018

Jesus and his followers are walking down a dirt road in a lush, green area near the source of the Jordan River. They are in the northern part of Galilee, more than 100 miles north of Jerusalem and nearing villages around Caesarea Philippi.

About 15 years before the birth of Jesus, King Herod built a temple of white marble on this location and dedicated it to the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. After Herod’s death, his son, Philip, was made the ruler of this region, and after making some improvements, he changed the name to include Caesar Augustus and himself – Caesarea Philippi.

As Jesus and his disciples walk, the disciples are chatting with one another. When there is a pause in the conversation, Jesus breaks the silence with a question: “Who do people say that I am?”

Let’s think together about that question. Who do we say Jesus is? What words might we use to describe Jesus?

Son of God: the very first verse of Mark’s Gospel states that Jesus is the Son of God. At his baptism, God says, “This is my son.” When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, Satan says, “*If* you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread.”

Teacher: what are some of his teachings that come to mind? The new commandment, the Golden Rule, the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” and “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” The parable of the Good Samaritan (he told more than 40 parables).

Healer: he opened the eyes of the blind, unstopped the ears of the deaf, and freed the crippled to dance.

Savior: Jesus saves us from bondage, from evil, from a meaningless life, from death.

Political Activist: According to the Gospel of Luke, in his first sermon, he said “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

The Light of the world: the one who shows us the true path in life that we should take.

Good Shepherd: the one who cares for us the way a shepherd would care for his sheep.

Messiah: The Greek word for Messiah is Christos, or in English, Christ. When we say, Jesus Christ, we are saying, “Jesus, the Messiah.” Those who became his followers – originally called people of the Way, and later, “Christians” – are those who believe Jesus is the Christos, the Messiah. The Jews had been yearning for the Messiah for centuries. Messiah means “the anointed one.” That is, the one anointed by God.

The Romans said that Caesar was the one anointed by God. So, it is at Caesarea Philippi, in the shadow of the temple built to honor Caesar Augustus, that Jesus asks the question of his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter, blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the anointed one.” And I can almost picture Peter pointing to the magnificent marble temple and saying, “Caesar is not the anointed one. You are.”

Jesus was God’s chosen one, but when we focus on this passage, it seems apparent that he knew nothing about marketing. If you want to attract people you tell them that if they buy one, they get one free. You tell people that for only \$19.99, they can purchase the product that will peel their potatoes in seconds or block out the glare of the sun while driving. If you want to draw people to you, you tell them what will make them thin or you promise free shipping.

If the church wants to attract new members, we broadcast that all are welcome. Some churches advertise that they are providing a class on improving your marriage or managing your finances. We advertise the expert speakers we are hosting. We tell people what they can *get* if they come to church.

Not Jesus. His word to would-be followers is to say, that he is going to be rejected by every last one of the religious authorities. Jesus told his disciples straight out that he would undergo great suffering and be nailed to a cross. “And, if you want to become my follower,” he said, “there is a cross waiting for you, too.”

He says, “Deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it.”

Today’s gospel lectionary reading is troublesome. I prefer the passages that talk about Jesus loving us, don’t you? But for 20 centuries, these verses have stubbornly hung on and refused to vanish. There have been plenty of attempts to overlook the words or to twist the words into something less jarring and less demanding, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record them.

Let’s think together again. What comes to mind when Jesus says, “Deny yourself and take up your cross?” It is costly to follow Jesus. What are some of the things it costs us?

Our time: Instead of being here in worship, you could be reading the newspaper or watching the Sunday morning political shows or playing golf or sleeping in and going to brunch.

What does it cost to follow Jesus? Our money: We give a portion of our money to the church to insure that there are pastors and musicians to lead worship and teach and provide pastoral care. We give a portion of our income to support ministries that help people who are hurting, and as a spiritual discipline to deepen our relationship with God by recognizing that all you have comes from God, so a portion is given away.

What does it cost to follow Jesus? Our popularity/standing in society: The values of Jesus clash with the values of society. The world says the more you have the happier you will be. Jesus says you must give away a portion of your wealth or you will lose your soul. The world says, “If someone hurts you, even the score.” Jesus says, “Forgive – even your enemies.” The world says to be suspicious of people of different races and religions. Jesus says that when we welcome a stranger, we welcome him. Some people will be uncomfortable being around you if you ever mention your faith and why it propels you to feed people who are hungry and welcome refugees

and try to dismantle the racism in our society. William Willimon says that the cross you have to bear is not a bad back or a difficult mother-in-law, but what you get when you follow Jesus.

Jesus knows that following him can be costly. In the first century, it might have entailed an extreme sacrifice – losing your family and friends, losing your job, enduring physical persecution, or losing your life.

In 21st century America, the cross still produces suffering, but for most of us, it probably will not mean physical suffering. More likely it will mean mental anguish and personal sacrifice.

Your cross may be that God calls you to take up an unpopular cause – to stand up for people regardless of their race, gender identity, or religion. It may be to speak out against lax gun laws or the death penalty or to resist some government policy that is at odds with the way of Jesus. Some people may ostracize you or speak poorly of you.

Following Jesus can be costly. It entails denying ourselves; that is, putting God before personal ambition. However, Jesus says that “those who lose their life for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

It is critical for us to remember that the cross was not only an instrument of death, but also the vehicle of resurrection. One way of living must die in order for a new way of living to be born.

A colleague talked to a friend of his who is a committed Christian and who has spent much of his career as a prison psychiatrist. He works with extreme cases, people who have done the wrong thing, sometimes a cruel thing, over and over. They are examples of broken humanity writ large. The doctor talked about two particular men with whom he was working. One was raised by his mother in a room over a Chicago bar. Every night his mother would lock him in his room and go downstairs and drink herself into oblivion. As a child, he would beat on the door, scream and cry for his mother to let him out. She never answered. After a couple of years of this, he gave up. Not just on his mother, but on all human relationships. He embarked on a life of crime that landed him in a Wisconsin prison, where he was once again behind a locked door.

The psychiatrist told of another man who grew up on a sharecropper’s farm in South Carolina. Every Friday afternoon the little boy would walk with his mother to the bus stop where she would catch a bus to Charleston for the weekend to escape the boredom of farm life and the chore of motherhood. Every Monday, the little boy would go back to the bus stop and greet his returning mom. But as time went on, she returned less and less on that Monday bus, and at some point, he decided to never meet the bus again. He told his story from a maximum security prison.

My colleague heard these two tragic tales and asked the psychiatrist if there was any possibility that such wounded people could ever change. And the doctor replied, “Yes. I’ve seen people do a 180° change. I have seen people make a permanent change.”¹

If such hardened criminals can change, you and I can too.

Perhaps you need to nail your anger to the cross and let it die so that kindness can be born. Perhaps you need to nail your judgmental attitude to the cross so that empathy and understanding can be born. Perhaps you need to nail your stinginess to the cross so that a generous spirit can be born. Perhaps you need to nail your hubris to the cross so that humility can be born. Perhaps you need to nail a feeling of self-pity to the cross, so that a spirit of gratitude can be born.

God is always seeking to transform us into a better spouse, a better friend, a better parent, a better son or daughter, a better neighbor, a better church member, a better citizen of the world.

Take a risk. What do you have to lose? Your soul?

NOTE

1. Michael Lindvall, "The Problem with Regulatory Agencies," March 29, 2009.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the cosmos, who is in all things and in whom all things dwell, we pause to ponder Jesus, your Anointed One, the Messiah. Who do we say he is? Who do we say he is not so much with our words, but by the manner in which we live? Is he genuinely our guiding star? Do we really hear his words?

How well do we share our bread with those who are hungry? Do we take the initiative to extend hospitality to the stranger? Do we muster the courage to resist lies and stand for the truth? Do we set aside time to visit those who are ill and alone? Do we demonstrate our solidarity with those who are oppressed so that they may be set free? Are we vulnerable with those who suffer so that we may shoulder part of their burden?

Sustainer of our lives, through your chosen one, you laid at our feet an intimidating challenge – to deny ourselves, to pick up our cross and follow him. Help us to understand that you do not command us to question our worth or suppress our potential; rather, you call on us to reach beyond our self-centered desires that push you to the periphery and quash healthy ties with others. Help us to know that it is only because of your true love for us that you challenge us.

Like a parent who will not allow us to settle for our small selves, you confront us with our petty grievances and envy of others, our short temper and harsh judgments, our self pity and timidity. Help us to know that you confront us not to condemn us, but to call us to our better selves where compassion and courage and generosity thrive. Help us to follow the path of Jesus so that love will saturate our heart, joy will infuse our spirit, beauty will fashion our character, peace will permeate our soul, and hope will spark our vision.

Gracious God, as flood waters continue to sweep through the Carolinas, a typhoon wreaks havoc in the Philippines, a brutal dictator directs attacks against his own citizens in Syria, and a suicide bombing in Afghanistan kills dozens, we pray that all may know that in life and in death you are with them. May all who suffer and all who grieve find strength and healing; and may the resurrection of Christ heighten their hope in your promise of new life.

We give thanks for leaders who sounded the alarm of approaching disaster and evacuated people from harm's way. We are grateful for first responders who risk their lives to rescue people from danger. And we pray for world leaders who reject the anger and fear that lead to armed conflict, and dedicate themselves to the frustrating, arduous, grueling, but ultimately satisfying work of promoting peace.

May each of us hear the call of Christ to follow him, and may we answer him with our very best. And now we pray with sincerity, the prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray, saying, **"Our Father...**