

Lent 2B
Mark 8:31-38
February 25, 2018
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While historical authenticity is questioned by literary scholars, Mark Twain is commonly cited as having said, “Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand. But as for me, I always noticed that the passages which trouble me the most are those which I do understand.”

Regardless of the source of these words I find them to be fitting for our scriptural conversation today. There is no real misunderstanding what Jesus says here. No funny business in the Greek. No ancient Judeo-Christian turns of phrase. It’s clear. It’s pointed. We get it. There is no real denying what discipleship looks like in Mark 8.

If we give these words more than lip service in our ears, in our minds, and on our hearts, troublesome might be putting it gently. What has been described as the very center of the Christian discipleship handbook is easily understood and easily the most difficult thing any of us will ever be called to do.

And that is exactly the point that Jesus seems to make here. The point for Peter, for the disciples, and the crowd. The point for the elders, chief priests, and scribes. The point for you and me. Following Jesus is difficult. Picking up a cross is difficult. Carrying it around is difficult. Following Jesus with it is difficult. Ending up where Jesus ended up with it is diffi...well...deadly.

Denial is easier, is safer, it is more comfortable than this call because we get to remain in control of our lives. The scales are not tipped out of our favor. Our world is not turned upside down. Power doesn’t change hands. We don’t have to deal with suffering and rejection and death.

We're in charge, and the human things remain tightly fixed within our grasp.

But Jesus denies our denial. He rebukes our rebukes and says sternly, "Get in line – or get out." Fall in! Fall into the suffering and rejection and even the death of that cross because the story doesn't end there.

Because not even death will stop Jesus and those who follow him from living lives that are abundant; from living lives that are resurrected. Lives set free from the fickle human systems of control. Set free from retaliatory scales. Set free from vain senses of power and authority. Set free from the most self-defeating influence of all: our own selves.

When we fall into those churning baptismal waters we emerge transformed into called and claimed, commissioned and provisioned children of God whose lives are smeared by grace, mercy, and love. We emerge as those who are called not to ignore the suffering of others, but to enter into it. Not to simply offer thoughts and prayers to those whose hearts ache but to bear witness to divine things through word and deed. Be they shouts of justice for the oppressed or quiet arms of tenderness embracing the forgotten.

We emerge as those willing to be our true selves in relationship with others being their true selves. Selves that are not generated through achievement or success. Selves not defined by skin color or orientation. Selves not fashioned by that which separates but rather that which unites.

We emerge as those willing to come alongside those experiencing brokenness and suffering. Those experiencing pain and loss, because, as David Lose says, "We meet people most truly when we admit and embrace That we are [just] like them. It is then that we experience that God is with us through the cross and is calling us to life and courage in and through the resurrection."

Yes, picking up the cross is difficult. Carrying it and following Jesus is difficult. So too is ending up where Jesus ended up with it. Christian discipleship is difficult. But we do not do it alone. Everything we do, everything we say, everything we are as disciples of Christ are in response to what Christ has already done for us.

In the end, it is as clear as mud: Jesus denies our denial and invites us into denial. Deny yourself everything that would try to call you anything but who you really are: a beloved child of God. One who, though once was dead, is now alive.