

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Mark 8:31-38
SERMON SERIES: Deepening Discipleship
SERMON TITLE: Cross-bearing

I can imagine how Peter felt. He was the first one to proclaim Jesus the Messiah. But then, Jesus began talking about the Son of Man undergoing great suffering, being rejected by the religious establishment, being killed, and after three days rising again.

Peter must have been shocked! I would have been. So Peter pulled Jesus aside and rebuked him. We're not told the reasons for the rebuke. Perhaps Mark wanted those of us who encountered his gospel to put ourselves in Peter's shoes and fill-in the blanks as to our own reasons for rebuking Jesus under these circumstances.

And that's not too hard to do. Think about it: Would any of us have wanted Jesus to endure what he endured—even with a promise of rising again? I'll be honest with you, I still have a hard time confronting the events of Holy Week. And frankly, if it had been up to me to write the Jesus story—I would have written it differently with a clear-cut, unambiguous triumph for the kingdom of God without all of that suffering and death business that only complicates things..

So I guess Jesus' rebuke of Peter is also directed at me—to us. The text says that Jesus turned and looked at his disciples and said to Peter: *Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.* Well, there we have it! It's not about what I want—or what you want—it's about the things of God—especially when it comes to the suffering, rejection, death and rising again of the Son of Man.

And for the most part, I've acknowledged this. As much as I would have preferred an easier story—and as hard as it is for me to confront the gut-wrenching events of Holy Week—I have embraced the Jesus story with all of its tragic poignancy.

But now we come to really hard part: *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.

God help us. Jesus is no longer talking about the Son of Man—Jesus is talking about us! *If any want to become my followers...*well, I’ve said yes to being a follower of Jesus. I first made that commitment publicly back in 1963 when I was confirmed. The pastor asked me if I professed by faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and I said yes. But he didn’t ask me if I was ready to deny myself, take up my cross and follow Jesus! He didn’t ask me if I was ready to find life by losing it!

But somewhere along the line, as I studied the scriptures and did some reading, the issue of cross-bearing claimed my attention. Questions came to mind: How far am I willing to go in following Jesus? Am I ready to put my life on the line in the dangerous places of the world for Jesus’ sake and for the sake of the gospel—especially when it involves taking up a cross fashioned for me by enemies who seek to put me to death in the most brutal and humiliating manner? Is life really to be found in living like this?

As I’ve wrestled with these questions of deepening discipleship, several things have become clear to me: First of all, I’m afraid. Even though Jesus made this journey before us, I’m still afraid. I’m not much of a risk taker. I don’t like rejection. I want people to like me.

I don’t want to suffer, even if it is for the sake of Jesus. I try to avoid danger. I want to save my life. I seek out safety and security. In the places where I have lived, I’ve chosen to stay away from the “dangerous” parts of town even though these dangerous places, so filled with suffering and pain, are the very places Jesus would have me go.

Which reminds me: When I was serving as the youth director at Mt. Olivet UMC in Arlington, VA during my seminary days, I vividly remember the times when our youth group

would venture into inner city Washington, D. C. to deliver food to a shelter for homeless women. Every time we went I had a knot in stomach because inner city D. C. was a dangerous place—and I worried that there might be a cross with my name on it in that neighborhood. So my aim was to get in and get out just as quickly as I could. I was afraid.

Now on one level—on an abstract level—I would never admit to being ashamed of Jesus' words. But practically speaking—I am ashamed of what Jesus taught because I'm not willing to follow him as far as he would have me go.

But thankfully, this is not true for everyone. This too became clear to me while we were living in Washington D. C. While I certainly was afraid of placing myself in harm's way, I also knew of a community of Christians who lived intentionally in the inner city of Washington, D. C. so that they could minister among the people there. They called themselves the Sojourners community.

Many of these brothers and sisters in Christ raised their children in the midst of prostitutes and drug dealers working the mean streets of our nation's capitol. They chose to share the risks alongside their poverty-stricken neighbors who had no choice but to raise their children on those same mean streets. Lives were at risk there. Crime was rampant. Gunfire was not an uncommon sound in these neighborhoods.

These brothers and sisters helped me understand what Jesus was talking about when he spoke of self-denial because it seemed to me that to live where these folks lived must have meant overcoming their every instinct for self-preservation, survival and safety. But they did it. They demonstrated to me that it was indeed possible to overcome fear—to live boldly and courageously for Jesus Christ while putting everything on the line.

One other thing: I became acquainted with some of these folks from Sojourners, and I sensed they knew something about life—about abundant life—that I had yet to discover in all of

my efforts to play it safe. These people trusted God with their lives—and for the families in that community—with the lives of their children. Most of these folks had grown up in middle class families with middle class values, just as I had. But they had freely chosen to lose their old ways of life to follow Christ into a new and ever-more abundant life on the mean streets of Washington D. C. because the main issue for them was not the danger in where they lived but whom they followed.

So what does all of this mean for us? Well, I don't know about you, but I need your help to deepen my discipleship. I do want to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus—even into the dangerous places that are near to us right here in Pflugerville. My spirit is willing, but my flesh is weak. My experience in Washington D. C. took place over 25 years ago—but I'm still afraid. So I invite you to hold me accountable—to push me and to prod me to become the disciple Jesus calls me to be.

And who knows, perhaps we can help one another. But it won't happen by osmosis. Intentionality is required. So I ask you: As we build a new building and continue on with being the church in this place, how will we deepen our discipleship? How will we keep the call before us? How will we keep pushing one another and prodding one another to become the disciples Jesus calls us to be?

His words, at least, will not go away: ***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.***

Amen.