

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

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Pastor Kelsey

Mark 8:31-9:8

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. **32** He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33** But 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."

34 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. **35** 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. **36** For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? **37** Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? **38** Those 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." **9 1** And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, **3** and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. **4** And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. **5** Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." **6** He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. **7** Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" **8** Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

Prayer & Sermon

Loving and Listening God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

No one likes being told they are wrong or need to change. It can make us feel embarrassed or shameful, or perhaps indignant or defensive. Or perhaps we feel guilty or sad. No matter what emotional response it brings, being corrected or being given criticism is not the easiest thing for anyone. For me, my reflex reaction to being told I am wrong or need to change the way I act, I either get defensive or I cry. I can think of many examples through my life where I have had to remind myself to calm down and accept the criticism, to listen to what I could do better. I think of the few times I got especially called out in elementary through high school and the one time I was pulled over by the cops and I remember how I couldn't help but cry at having to face my mistake. I have always been a rule follower, when I was young I was the most goody two shoes, teachers pet in all of my classes. I don't like doing wrong or being rebuked by those in authority or those I hope have a good impression of me. Thinking of my reaction to being scolded by my 10th grade digital photography teacher for playing a phone game to keep myself awake in class.... Tears, that time, by the way. I think of those moments of how much it gutted me to be rebuked for little things by teachers, and I cannot imagine how poor Peter felt when Jesus not only rebukes him in front of all the disciples in this passage, but calls him Satan! By the man who Peter just identified as the Messiah in the moments before this conversation, told in the verses leading into those we read this morning. The MESSIAH, Savior of the Israelites, son of God, divine being, compared Peter to SATAN just for trying to convince Jesus that he shouldn't be KILLED. Overreaction much Jesus? Maybe a little bit dramatic, but perhaps not completely uncalled for as we dig a little deeper into what Jesus was trying to tell them.

The passage for this morning is full of little bits that have become well known on their own and have taken on a bit of a life of their own when pulled out of context of the rest of the passage. So we have a bit of unpacking to do with this one. The "Get behind me, Satan!" line has gotten popular in memes in the last few years. "Deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" is a favorite phrase to describe Christian Discipleship. There is the mind puzzle line of "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." And of course, the last half is a text that we talked about just a couple weeks ago for Transfiguration Sunday.

One of the first things that is important to address is the ways that the "Take up your cross and follow me" teaching has been used harmfully by many over the years.

One of the most common ways to interpret this teaching is to use it as a justification for suffering, or to explain why someone is suffering. “This is your cross to bear!” has been told to many who were experiencing suffering or oppression. When someone experiences bad luck after bad luck, they may be told or think themselves, “This is my cross to bear.” Those in abusive relationships have been convinced to stay with this saying. Structural discrimination and oppression like slavery and racism have been explained as that being the “cross to bear” by those being oppressed. Or, on the flipside, those who could do something about various injustices are given a pass, “That isn’t MY cross to bear, God will call someone else to bear it.” This teaching has been plucked out of its context, and in isolation it has become acceptable to let it support or lead to unjust and harmful things by those who use it in this way.

If this whole build up didn’t make it obvious, those ways of using it to perpetuate harm, support oppression, or glorify misery, are not a faithful interpretation to what Jesus is more likely to be trying to say with using this phrase in the context of the rest of the conversation. We must look at the rest of the conversation to fully make sense of Jesus’s call to take up our cross and follow him.

Let’s set the scene. To do that, I am going to read the 4 verses that lead up to the reading for today that give us a bit more context.

Mark 8: 27 Jesus 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?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

So, first off, this whole interaction is happening in a village named after the Roman emperor Augustus Caesar and the local King at the time, Herod the Great’s son, Philip. Any specific details given to us in the Bible typically are significant, so it is unlikely to be an accident that Jesus is teaching about his true identity of Messiah, of Son of Man, as the bringer of God’s Kingdom, teacher of how to live honoring that Kingdom instead of worldly Kingdoms. After Peter declares Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus tells them to not tell anyone. There are a lot of reasons this could be, but when we consider how this conversation continues with Peter really not understanding who Jesus is and will be, perhaps Jesus tells them to keep it to themselves for not because they don’t really understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. Remember, before Jesus, the Jewish idea for who the Messiah would be was centered around a grand king and triumphant warrior who would bring power and might to the Israelite people. We know in hindsight that that isn’t quite how Jesus ended up interacting with the world. He neither became King nor fought in battles. It is this conversation acknowledging that he is the Messiah that brings us into Jesus trying to teach them what is DOES mean for him to be the Messiah, or Son of Man. Jesus is describing himself as quite the opposite than the

Messiah was expected to be, “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.” Jesus is not refuting the title of Messiah, but is challenging them to think differently about what the Messiah truly is. This speech is like Jesus saying, “your idea of what a Messiah is needs to change.” Peter finds this idea of the Messiah to be unbelievable. Jesus is indirectly telling Peter and the disciples that their picture of the Messiah is wrong and they need to change everything they expected and hoped for out of a Messiah. So, like the many of us who get indignant or defensive when facing we were wrong, Peter digs his heels in on the idea that Jesus being the Messiah means royal triumph, and he rejects the idea that their Messiah could be the opposite and instead of leading winning battles, Jesus would accept that he would suffer, be rejected and killed. So, Peter does what anyone stuck in defensive mode does, he decided to argue about it with Jesus himself. Which, of course, Jesus was not taking that crap. Jesus was not messing around and wasn’t going to let Peter ignore the hard truth and reject having to deal with his complicated feelings about being wrong. And so, Jesus calls him out in way that is sure to snap him out of it. In a high school comedy, this would be portrayed as the best friend slapping the main character in the face when they start freaking out about something. Jesus may not slap Peter in the face, literally, but gets about as close as he can, as he declares, “Get behind me, Satan!” I am pretty sure the Messiah calling me Satan would shut me up pretty quick! Jesus explains why Peter must shift his thinking: “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Jesus is letting Peter know that those grand ideas of the Messiah as this triumphant warrior King was based fully on human values of victory and triumph and success, and not on God’s idea of what it means to bring a new Kingdom and live a full life. Through this first part of the teaching, Jesus is setting the topic of conversation on how he is a different kind of Messiah than expected, bringing a different kind of Kingdom than they expected or are used to.

It is from that perspective that Jesus goes into what it means to become one of his followers. He says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Within the context, Jesus is saying, “If this new kind of Messiah and new kind of Kingdom based on God’s values sounds good to you and you want in, this is what you have to be ready to do.” So, now that the context has been shared, what does “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” mean? An important thing to remember first, is that in this point of Jesus’s journey, no one except Jesus and God know that Jesus will die by Crucifixion. So, Jesus calling them to take up their cross is not exactly in reference to following Jesus’s footsteps toward sacrifice on the cross. Crucifixion was still meaningful to the Jewish people though. The reason why Jesus was crucified is because that was the Romans favorite way to execute dissidents, execute those who threatened their power or went against their rule. So, as Jesus is inviting them to follow him and become part of and share with

others about this Kingdom more powerful than the Romans, this call to “take up your cross and follow me,” is a way of calling them into being a part of something that actively goes against Rome and all empires of the world. Jesus follows up this call to “take up their crosses and follow me” with “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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?” Basically, following Jesus and joining in the Kingdom of God makes you part of a power greater than those pesky Romans. The Romans think they have ultimate power by claiming control over their right to live and threatening to end their lives if they stick a toe out of line. But the joke’s on them, with God we have eternal life. Death does not need to be feared when in God’s Kingdom. By taking away the fear of death, taking away the fear of being punished by the State, by the Romans, for the sake of taking part in God’s Kingdom and for sharing it, Jesus is boldly taking power away from the Romans and giving that power back to God. Jesus is calling them to bold discipleship, letting them know that he knows and will experience the consequences himself, and invites them into a Kingdom that celebrates love and justice instead of power, violence, and fear. “Take up your cross and follow me” now becomes less of a pithy phrase or toxic explanation for whatever suffering or injustice we or others are experiencing. Instead, it is a bold invitation into Christian discipleship, into relationship with God that Jesus promises will shake up our human ideas and push us to keep shaping our ideas and values toward God’s.

It is for that important reason that this teaching from Jesus still speaks so strongly to us today. We, like the disciples and any who were blown away at this idea of the very different Kingdom Jesus was teaching about, need the reminder to break from our mindsets and cycles of clinging to power and status. We need the proverbial Satan slap in the face from Jesus to remind us when our ideas about our faith and who Jesus is are rooted more in human ideas than God’s ideas. Like Jesus teaches Peter repeatedly through the passage read this morning--from when Peter got the Messiah answer right, to Peter needing to listen instead of thinking he knows best, to Peter being quieted again when he suggests building altars during the transfiguration on the mountain--we, too, could probably do better and quieting ourselves and listening to what we need to learn to be more like Jesus calls us to be as part of God’s Kingdom. We need to be open and ready to hear, not just the easy and comfortable teachings, but we need to be open and ready to hear the hard truths about what it means to be a Christian Disciple. Now, we don’t have Jesus right in front of us to call us Satan when we are getting too stuck in our own ideas or stubbornly holding onto old understandings. Though we do have the Holy Spirit that moves among us and through us, so we may hear these hard truths about how to become better Christian disciples from expected sources, like the Bible or your pastor (I hope), but the Spirit may also move and teach us from unexpected sources or bring us unexpected ideas.

What we can learn from Peter's mistakes and the world shifting teachings of Jesus in this passage is that Again and Again, we are implored to listen, especially when what we hear is unsettling. As we listen, truly listen and absorb and process what we are hearing, we may learn that we need to change in some way. Change our thinking, our actions, or our direction. When we need to make a change, it is likely that we may have realized we had been mistaken or leading to something harmful. As we realize those changes, taking a moment of repentance is likely to be appropriate. What that repentance looks like would depend on what your shifting from. Perhaps it is just between you and God, perhaps you have realized you wronged someone specific and owe them an apology. Though this passage uses a lot of strong language, calling Peter Satan, telling us to not be afraid of crucifixion or other radical consequences for living out the Gospel, and talk of life and death, ultimately Jesus's message is one of hope for those of us, all of us, who are not yet perfect, have areas we will need to change and grow. God's Kingdom flips the values of Earthly Kingdoms on their head. Where we are used to getting shamed for messing up or being wrong. Where it is easy for us to expect punishment for getting something as important as who Jesus is or the main message of Jesus's teaching off. Jesus tells us of God's Kingdom that is not founded on power, violence, and retribution, but God's Kingdom is one of love, grace, and mercy. This doesn't mean there aren't consequences for our mistakes when we have God on our side. But, we need not fear violent death ordered by God because we get something in our faith wrong. We need not fear being shamed or ridiculed by God for a mistake. We need not fear God being defensive or indignant with us. Perhaps a bit sassy like Jesus was with Peter in this passage. Our God of life and love will always be happy with whatever moves we make toward how God wants us to live. God will always be welcoming as we listen to the Spirit and accept new ideas of who God is and how to live out our faith. May we turn our ears toward the movement of the Spirit and be willing to change based on what we learn so we may continue building the Kingdom of God together.

Creator God,
We cannot hear the trees growing—seeds pushing up through the dirt into the sun.
And we cannot hear a single drop of rain, missing one in the many.
We cannot hear the weight of people's grief, a burden that so often is silent.
And we cannot hear when hearts are changed, but you can. You hear it all.
So once again, we come to you with bowed heads and hopeful hearts,
Asking that you would lend us your ears.
Help us to hear as you hear so that we can live as you lived. We are listening.
Amen.