

“The Way of the Cross”
Mark 8:34 – 38
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Over the last few weeks we’ve been exploring what it means to be the church – literally in Greek, *ecclesia*, “called out ones.” We’ve lifted up three historic “Great Ends” for our church’s focus:

1. To be *messengers* of the good news;
2. To work for God’s *justice*; and
3. To create the spiritual *shelter of community*.

In the weeks ahead, as the three “Great Ends” sink in, let us continue to explore our *church’s calling*, and how our current vision promotes these great ends. Throughout this fall season and during Advent, I intend to continue to encourage each and every one of us to explore our own *individual calling*.

What does it mean for each one of us, as individual believers, to be called out by Jesus in our daily lives ... not just once, but again and again, on the road of discipleship?

The gospel reminds us that even for the earliest apostles, discipleship was a process. Immediately prior to our reading for today, Peter is the very first to proclaim to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Messiah!” But immediately, when Jesus begins to say how he will suffer and be crucified, Peter rebukes Jesus.

Rebuking is what teachers do to students, or even what Jesus does to demons. Can you imagine Peter’s nerve, to scold, to admonish, to rebuke Jesus? Even Peter’s discipleship takes a lifetime. Listen again to God’s word according to Mark 8:34 – 38.

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my

words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

In the lovely children's book *the Velveteen Rabbit*, the Rabbit asks the wise old Skin Horse:

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, or bit by bit?"

He's asking about becoming Real ... not merely a plush toy, but being real and alive. And he wants very much to know how to get there.

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who ... have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."¹

I've come to understand discipleship as something just like this:

You become a disciple. It takes a long time to become a disciple. You are likely to be worn in many places. But it is worth it in the end, worth more than anything else, worth more, even, than life itself.

If only becoming a disciple were settled once and for all:

- In a moment of professing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.
- In a moment of being baptized into the faith.
- In a moment of becoming a member of the church.

If only it were that simple. But discipleship is a lifetime of being "called out" by Jesus to follow him -- not once, but again and again ...

¹ Margery Williams, *the Velveteen Rabbit, or How Toys Become Real* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983), p. 4-5.

a lifetime of letting go of control, of letting Jesus be Lord, of allowing ourselves to be led ... led, even, to the cross.

Buddhists have their own doctrine of dying to the self they call it “detachment.”

Jesus is asking of us the converse of that: he’s calling us to *attachment* ... specifically, attachment to him. The question “what would Jesus do?” is not a bad place to begin. But if I ask that question, I must be prepared for the answer.

When Jesus calls me to follow him – when Jesus calls me to “attach” to him – it requires me, over time, to give up attachment to my self; to relinquish my ego and my fears, my authority and self-determination.

It requires me to let go of everything I clutch so hard, so that my hands aren’t too full to take up the cross and follow him. As the modern Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer prophetically said:

“When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

This, I think, is what it means when Jesus says:

“If any of you would be my disciple, you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. Try to save your life, and you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, you will gain it. For what will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life?”²

It is so counter-cultural, in this age that has made self-determination a small god. A recent study has shown that for relatively affluent Americans, freedom means being able to choose; the more choices we have, the more liberty we enjoy. But I dare say that we’ve made a tyranny of choices, for our self is, in the end, insatiable: a glut of things – even beauty and adventures will never satisfy our longing for happiness and meaning.

² Mark 8: 34-35

Jesus offers an alternative: to give yourself away; to deny yourself; to follow him; to attach yourself to his will, and in it, to find your deepest joy.

It must be said that dying to the self is not always in the form of physical death; nor is death always the hardest to do. As scholar Lamar Williamson reminds us:

“Losing your life for the sake of the gospel” more often means living from day to day with our ego in the offering plate. “Not all [who would give up their life] are giants or martyrs”³

The vast majority of disciples are ordinary people who are called to do extraordinary things: sacrificing aspirations to raise their children or taking in a foster child, or raising an ethical eyebrow at work, or giving a large amount of money when a crisis hits, or taking on mission work here in the community, or saying unpopular things when the conversation turns mean and ugly.

Through the centuries, Williamson says, there have been countless number of faithful people in many contexts, “who have interpreted the text by their lives”⁴

It has made me wonder how I would interpret the text with my life. What would it mean for me to “give up my life for the gospel”?

It has, in fact, meant different things for me at different stages of my life. In simple terms, most recently, it has meant listening to Jesus’ call for me to return to “ordained” ministry as an interim pastor.

Far more complicated was my call to let go of my need to please others, to be praised, and to be recognized.

Ironically, after ten years in the “ordained” ministry, answering God’s call meant deciding to leave the “ordained” ministry. It was the first time I gladly gave up who I was suppose to be and took the risk to go off into the unknown to find myself with the faith that God would show

³ *Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), p. 156

⁴ *Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), p. 157

me the way. That decision set me off on a journey of discipleship that has led me to where I am today.

You see, discipleship is never a “done deal,” and Jesus is still calling me to attach to him more, to follow more closely, to let him lead me. Right now, for me, I think it might mean having greater confidence to speak the truth as I see it, not arrogantly, but fearlessly, regardless of the consequences.

This is not easy, for I want to be liked. This is not easy, for I hate making mistakes, and the application of the gospel always brings unintended consequences.

Right now, for me, it means that I don't assume it is all up to me, thinking what I say and do is “oh-so-crucial” – while at the same time taking seriously how God might use me to preach, to teach, and to heal with His power.

This is not easy, there are days when I want to know the outcome; or somehow control that outcome – make it all turn out “right.” As if I know what that might look like.

This is how I'm hearing my calling today.

The question is, how about you? What does it mean for you to lose everything for the sake of the gospel? What does it mean for you to deny yourself, in order to follow Jesus?

I am keenly aware that it is one thing for the preacher to tell his story of calling, and quite another to apply it in your own lives.

So, let me tell you a story of calling. Frank is a member of a church on the north shore of Chicago. He shared his story at a Lenten worship service a number of years ago, this story is part of his journey on the road of discipleship, ... a road that each one of us has been on for a long time, a road where Jesus meets us again and again, calling us to follow him, to attach to him, to deny ourselves and let him lead.

Frank and his wife Laura came from different backgrounds – he was a Roman Catholic and she a protestant, but they “peacefully coexisted.” They sent the kids to protestant Sunday school while they attended worship together. He had been on the road of discipleship for a quite some time before he heard Jesus’ call in a new way:

“Over time,” Frank said, “The protestant concept of the call made me start to understand that there might be things that we are supposed to be doing on God’s behalf, and more importantly, there might be things I was supposed to be doing. But, like most, overall I felt that I was doing well by my family and wasn’t that my primary responsibility?”

The idea of a call persisted as I joined this church I saw men and women who were acting on God’s call daily and ... they set a good example for me to follow. So I got involved; I became a deacon, served on a pastoral nominating committee, and thought I was doing what God was calling me to do.”

But then Jesus called Frank again.

“I came to believe,” he said, “that my involvement at church was only TRAINING. My real call – and I believe most of us have been called this way, is in our public lives outside this holy place we call First Presbyterian Church. We are asked by God to take those teachings and gifts we have received out into the world so that God can see His love in our daily activities. ... Once you have accepted the call, the assignments to do God’s will in our world ... begin to be clear.”

And so it was that when Frank joined the National Association of Realtors in 1998, an organization representing 1.3 million members from every conceivable religious tradition.

Frank discovered that beyond United Way, the organization did no charitable work. And he found himself “speaking to the Board of Directors about having a social conscience.” The realtors “gave [him] approval to begin to do things – like Habitat for Humanity and other programs ... trying to remove obstacles to homeownership based on

race, education or income.” And, he confesses, in comparison to all the success he’s enjoyed in his corporate career “those feelings of reward have never measured up to the feelings you get from having been part of helping someone have another chance in this life.”

And then, Jesus called Frank again ten years ago now.

“On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I was in as much shock and disbelief as anyone over the tragic events of that day. I have spent many years doing business in New York City and hosted hospitality functions in ‘Windows of the World’ on top of the World Trade Center.

Laura and I planned a quick dinner that evening so that we could go to church services for the 9/11 victims. Before we could leave, the phone rang. It was the President of the Realtor Association, and he said to me:

‘Frank, what are the realtors going to do about today’s tragedy? ... We must help! We must be part of the answer to this senseless act? Can you write a plan ...?’

Oh Lord! How much more literal can you get? This time the call happened as an actual telephone call. ... I told the president that Laura and I were going to church ... but that I would be back to him by morning with a plan.

Actually, I had no idea of what to do and was simply buying time. Later in the evening, Laura and I muddled through with thoughts about fundraising to pay for the educational costs for the victims’ children.

The next morning I took the ... train at my normal time into the city and while staring out the window, I asked God’s help: ‘Tell me what it is we are to do here, please tell me.’ And as I asked and prayed and looked out the window, I had an absolutely clear idea of what it was we were supposed to do.”

This is the idea – this gift from God -- that came to Frank that morning:

For most victims' families, their life insurance policies would kick in only after 100 days, and in the meantime, with their main wage-earner being lost, there would be no money for rent or mortgage. Realtors could organize nationally, from the local, state and national level, to pay the rents and mortgages for 100 days for victims' families.

“Realtors,” Frank says, “help people buy and sell homes, and our response to 9/11 would be that no one would lose their home.”

Frank called the president of the association, and they put in the first \$1 million; in 90 days, realtors raised \$8.6 million to pay the rents and mortgages for over 1,300 families.

“If any of you would be my disciple, you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. Try to save your life, and you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, you will gain it?”⁵

It doesn't happen all at once, but bit by bit.

I don't know where you are on your journey.

I don't know what your gifts are, or your struggles. All I know is this:

Jesus is out ahead, in front of us, calling ... calling us not once, but a thousand times.

Will you say yes to him again, and again, and again...?

Amen.

⁵ Mark 8: 34-35