

“Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel:
4) The Things We Don’t Have to Do”

a sermon by

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Text: “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’” (Mark 8:34).

Several years ago Malcolm Gladwell, a social scientist, wrote a book he entitled *Tipping Points*. In that book he talked about how changes in behavior or perception can reach a critical mass and then suddenly a whole new reality can set in. The fall of the Berlin Wall was a “tipping point.” It was the focal point of the end of the “cold war.” Within a very short period one of the world’s superpowers, the U.S.S.R. was no more.

Today, in the Arab world we have reached a new “tipping point.” As Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times* has pointed out, the elections in Iraq have changed the Arab world.

Whether you like the war in Iraq or whether you do not, it is indisputable that something has now happened in the Middle East that has brought a great deal of hope to that troubled area. As one observer put it, “When I saw eight million Iraqi people voting, I knew it was the start of a new Arab world.”

I.

The passage from which I read this morning is a “tipping point” in the Gospel of Mark. It is a watershed passage. In a sense, every event in the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark leads toward this passage and every subsequent event leads from it.

The setting of this passage is the area of Caesarea Philippi, just north of Israel. According to Mark’s gospel this is the place where Jesus raised the question: “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples answered that some people said that Jesus was John the Baptist, some said that he was Elijah, and still others, that he was one of the prophets. But when Jesus asked the central question, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responded by saying, “You are the Christ.”

The confession of Peter, however, becomes an occasion that places Jesus in conflict with Peter. Jesus asserts that it is necessary for the “Son of Man” to suffer many things, to be rejected, to be killed, and after three days, to rise again. This was not what Peter had in mind. So Peter rebuked Jesus and Jesus in turn rebuked Peter, forcing Peter to resume his proper place--behind Jesus as a disciple.

The disputation with Peter became the occasion for Jesus to issue to his disciples and to the crowd the call to discipleship: “If any one would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

These words sum up the Christian life. John Calvin in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (III, 7) wrote:

“We are not our own; therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions.

We are not our own; therefore let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all things that are ours.

On the contrary, we are Gods; to him, therefore, let us live and die.”

From this text Dietrich Bonhoeffer carved his famous sentence: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

So let us look at these elements of the Christian life.

II.

The first is the call to “deny ourselves.” Oftentimes people speak of giving up something for Lent. Usually it has to do with some particular thing that we think we should do without: chocolate, alcohol, or even some worrisome habit.

But that is not what Jesus is talking about. He is talking about something more radical. He is not talking about giving up a “thing,” he is talking about giving up the self--this endless fascination and narcissism that affects all of us. Today we live in a culture where self-fulfillment and self-realization are the goals to which all of us strive. The tragedy is that the self is not the answer; it is the problem. Jesus understood that. That is the purpose of his enigmatic statement that “those who seek to gain life will lose it, and only those who lose it will find it.”

This search for “self fulfillment” is one of the most destructive forces in our society. It has broken up more marriages, ruined more families, and destroyed more individuals’ lives than anything I know.

Jesus offers us something far different. He invites us to set aside this preoccupation with ourselves and find the fulfillment that comes from following Christ. We must say “no” to our own natural love of ease and comfort. We must say “no” to every course of action based on self-seeking and self-will. We must say “no” to every other voice except the voice of Christ if we have any hope of finding perfect freedom.

The second element in the Christian life is “taking up one’s cross.” Now, these were words that must have been frightening to the hearers of Jesus. They knew what crucifixion was. They had watched as the Romans drove nails into the hands and feet of prisoners and placed them on crosses. The Jewish historian Josephus records one occasion when the Romans crucified two thousand prisoners at one time. Crucifixion was painful; it was lengthy. Sometimes it would take several days before a person died.

Jesus said that if we are serious about following him, we should be prepared to take up a cross and follow him. Now let us be clear about this. Sometimes we speak of having to ‘bear a cross’. Usually by this we mean suffering through some difficult situation or even having to deal with a difficult person. Jesus is talking about something else. He is talking about the willing, voluntary nature of tackling a difficult situation, not because we have to but because we choose to do so as a means of following Jesus.

In his classic work, *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon relates the story of a man named Telemachus who lived in the Fourth Century. Telemachus spent a great deal of his life in a monastery in the desert where he engaged in prayer and meditation. But one day he felt God was calling him to a different vocation. He came to the city of Rome. There he encountered something he had never before experienced--the Roman arena. In those days

Christians were no longer thrown to the lions. But still the gladiators fought and on some afternoons hundreds of people were killed to the delight of the crowd.

One day Telemachus found his way to the arena. There were eighty thousand people there. He watched the chariot races, but as the gladiators entered the ring and began to prepare to fight, Telemachus was appalled at what he saw.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. He crossed the barrier between the crowd and the arena and stood between two gladiators. For a moment the crowds were silent. Then the crowd roared, "Let the games go on!" Some of the soldiers tried to push this old man away, but he held his ground. Finally, the captain of the guard raised his hand. A gladiator's sword rose and flashed; and Telemachus lay dead.

Suddenly, the crowd was silent. They were shocked that this holy man should have been killed that day. One by one every person in the arena rose from his seat and walked silently away. The games ended that day--they never began again. Telemachus, by his dying, had ended them. As Gibbon said of him, "His death was more useful to mankind than his life." That is what it means to take up one's cross.

The third element of the Christian life is "following Jesus." Several weeks ago I made a reference to the difference between "believing in Christ" and "following Jesus." One can believe all kinds of good things about Jesus and not make any real sacrifices in one's life but "following" Jesus inevitably calls us to the denial of the self and the taking up of a cross.

One of the most remarkable Christians of the past century was William Temple, who in 1942 was elected as Archbishop of Canterbury. He was a great scholar, preacher, teacher, and churchman. He was a person of such extraordinary gifts that George Bernard Shaw once called him "a realized impossibility."

One evening, as he was concluding a preaching service in Oxford, England, he led the congregation in singing one of the great hymns of Lent "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." As the congregation came to the last verse, he stopped the singing and asked the congregation to take a moment to read the last verse of that hymn to themselves. "Now," he said, if you mean them with all your heart, sing them as loud as you can. If you don't mean them at all, keep silent. If you mean them even a little and want to mean them more, sing them very softly." The organ played, and two thousand voices whispered:

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

