

WORSHIP

Sermon | 2.25.2018



The Promise of Taking Up Your Cross

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Mark 8:31-35

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.'

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.'

+ + +

This is the second Sunday of Lent.

The season of Lent offers us an opportunity to examine our faith and our relationship with God, and to grow in our appreciation of it.

This Lent at First Pres our worship will focus around the promises that God makes to us in preparation for the ultimate promise that we find in a tomb that is empty and a world that is changed.

Today our Scripture is from the gospel of Mark. Listen with me for the word of God.

+ + +

Yogi Berra once said, "when you come to a fork in the middle of the road, take it."

Sometimes, though, you can't do that. Sometimes you've got to make a decision – this way or that.



Life is a series of decisions. Right now parents of 5 or 6 year olds are making decisions about kindergarten. Whether to start them, or not. Where to send them – the neighborhood school? Charter? Lottery?

18 year olds are staring into the days that follow a quickly approaching graduation where they face a decision: work, gap year, military, or college? If the choice is college – which one? The long shot? The fall back? Big state school? Small liberal arts?

There is the decision to marry and whom to marry.

The decision about our vocation – which career path to walk.

The decision about when the career is over.

Every one of us faces a variety of decisions in our lives that we must make – and when we make them, things shift, we establish a new normal, and what once was is never the same again.

I've been thinking a lot recently about what lies beneath these decisions. And I think what drives many of life's choices is another decision that we all make, many times unconsciously, but a deeply personal and spiritual decision about what to live for, what to sacrifice for, what to follow and give to, what to die for.

We all make that decision.

We make it over and over again, every day of our lives.

David Foster Wallace was an unbelievably talented writer, and a man who was haunted by mental illness that led him to take his own life. A number of years ago, before his death, he delivered a remarkable commencement speech at Kenyon College to a group of students who were standing on the precipice of one of life's big decisions.

He said, "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

Wallace told the new graduates to be careful and intentional about the choices of what to worship, because some things can "eat you alive." If you choose to worship money and things, there will never be enough. If you choose to worship beauty and sexual allure, you will always feel ugly and "when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths." "Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid," he said, "and you will need ever more power to keep your fears at bay. Worship your intellect and you will end up feeling stupid, always on the edge of being found out."

He warned the graduates that "you can slip into this kind of worship, little by little, day by day" or you can choose to worship, to give your life to, to sacrifice for, to live and die for



something else, something good and authentic and important. It's up to you. You get to decide.

+ + +

Decision time came, a long time ago, for two young men standing knee deep in the waters of the Sea of Galilee, casting their nets. Another young man walked by their eyes met, he said "follow me," and Simon Peter and Andrew dropped their nets and began to follow.

Some people say that those first disciples must have known Jesus – that they must have heard him teach, and that they must have been struggling with the meaning of their own lives. Perhaps. But all the gospel of Mark tells us is that when Jesus came to the lakeshore and issued the invitation, it was decision time. He didn't tell them where they were going. He didn't give them an outline of a career path with measurable goals and outcomes. He said, "follow me." And they followed.

Later on there were twelve. Twelve men, that is. There were women, too, but back in those days the women weren't counted. They all followed as Jesus walked around the rolling hills of the Sea of Galilee, teaching in synagogues. They followed and watched in amazement while the crowds gathered everywhere they went, bringing their sick, their babies, the elderly, for his blessing, his touch. They listened as he said things they had never heard before: love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you, forgive those who offend you, love one another. They listened as he told them, again and again, that the kingdom of God is here in your midst, tiny, almost invisible, like a mustard seed, or leaven in a loaf of bread, but it is here in acts of kindness and compassion and fairness and love. They must have asked themselves,

"who is he?"

"Where are we going?"

And then in the middle of the story that the gospel of Mark tells, Jesus answers both questions and gives them an opportunity to drop out and go back to their fishing boats. It's decision time again. "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asks.

"Some think that you are John the Baptist, others say Elijah or one of the prophets."

"But **you**, who do **you** say that I am?"

Decision time.

Peter – who had been with Jesus since the beginning – is the one who answers the question:

"You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."



But while Peter gave the right answer, he didn't fully understand the decision.

Because Peter knew that to be the Messiah – and to follow the Messiah – was to claim victory over those who stood in the way of God's purposes.

Peter knew that the Messiah – and those who followed the Messiah – might not have been promised a life full of luxury, but were certainly promised a life that was fulfilling, and gratifying, and successful...in the most faithful sense of the word.

Peter was sure **that** promise was what his decision to drop his nets and follow Jesus was founded upon.

But then he discovered that the Messiah – and those who follow the Messiah – were promised something different.

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.

Decision time.

+ + +

I'll be honest – I've often found it hard to preach about these hard-hitting words that strip everything else away and get right to the heart of what it means to follow Jesus.

I can point to a few **other** people who have done it.

You've probably heard more than a few preachers from this pulpit talk about Dietrich Bonhoeffer – the German theologian who fled the Nazi regime at the beginning of the Second World War to teach in the safety of Union Seminary in New York City. After a short stint in those New York classrooms, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany because he knew that seeking after his own life was counter to the gospel. Instead, he led the confessing church in a resistance against Hitler, until he was arrested, imprisoned, and executed.

For those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.

That's inspiring. But, c'mon...how many of us are Dietrich Bonhoeffer? And how many times do we find ourselves in a situation in our culture with such a stark and obvious choice about what is – and isn't – of the gospel?

The problem I have with what Jesus promises: a cross for us to take up, a life for us to lose, and – in losing – to gain – isn't that I don't understand it. It's that I don't know where to



start – because there are so many other things I enjoy carrying around more than crosses. And any of the crosses that I consider picking up never seem quite heavy enough compared to what other, more faithful people, decide to bear.

+ + +

Craig Barnes, the President of Princeton Seminary, recently wrote a short piece in the *Christian Century*. He started by recounting a wedding he had officiated for a couple – the bride, who was petite, and the groom, who was a burly, former lineman on a college football team. During the exchange of vows, the groom said all the traditional things, “in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want,” but then he added a clause that no one saw coming, “and I will always be gentle with you.” At that point, Craig began to tear up.

“We tend to think of gentleness as a weak or fragile thing,” Barnes writes, “[but the Apostle Paul calls it a fruit of the Spirit.] As a virtue it arises from strength, from strong people who choose to honor the sacredness of their relationships.”

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited...but humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death...even death on a cross.”

“To live in Christ is to find this same gentle calling,” Barnes concludes, “Those of us who find ourselves in positions of influence and privilege face a pressing calling: to be humble and gentle toward others.”

I’m not sure what you are called to put aside, or what exactly is your cross to pick up and carry – but for me, as a person who benefits from privilege and as a person who is in a position of influence, choosing to be gentle –

Instead of choosing to be right
or choosing to be successful
or choosing to be powerful

but choosing to be gentle might be a cross that has more weight in this moment in history than I initially realized.

On the face of it, to be gentle in these days that we live, does seem a little weak.

There is so much pain.

So much anger.

So much ugliness in speech.

So much distrust.



So much blame.

So much self-righteousness.

So much scapegoating.

So much treating others as if they were less than human.

So little care.

So little conversation.

So little self-reflection.

So little empathy.

All of which, as I them out loud, sound like strategies for a people who are afraid and most interested in saving their own lives.

What has that gained us?

Because it feels like losing.

Perhaps –

Maybe – if we chose to be gentle – which would feel like losing – we might gain.

That's the promise. Decision time.

