

4. Looking in the Wrong Place

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

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Introduction to the Morning Lesson

In these Lenten sermons we are trying to see what is called in Mark's Gospel the "messianic secret," that is, what hides in plain sight about Jesus. Simply put, the secret is that Jesus' way is the way of the cross. It doesn't get any clearer than what he said to his first disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." He said that to Peter and the rest who followed him first and through the scriptures he says it again to us this morning.

Now despite this being the heart of the gospel and despite Jesus' warnings, the way of the cross is also the easiest thing for us to minimize or ignore. Even when faced with nearly losing their lives, some people are still reluctant to turn their eyes to God instead of looking only at the things of this world. For many years Jack Welch was the CEO of General Electric, one of the biggest and most powerful corporations in the world. Since his retirement several years ago he has written a couple of popular books about business and management. He appears frequently on various TV shows to talk expertly about leadership and economics. A lot of people admire Jack Welch and his success.

But a few years ago he nearly died. To save him required open heart surgery. When he left the hospital, a reporter asked Welch if his experience had changed him in any way or if he saw life differently.

Welch famously replied, "I didn't spend enough money." And from that moment on he vowed that never again would he let a bottle of wine costing less than \$100 cross his lips.¹

I think Jack Welch is looking in the wrong place for the meaning of life. But it's something of a cheap shot to point out other people's sins. We need to look at our own lives and how often we turn our eyes away from the cross. So let Jesus challenge us again with the words of today's text from Mark's Gospel.

Mark 8.31-9.1 (NRSV)

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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what

¹ Charles Colson, *The Good Life: Seeking Purpose, Meaning, and Truth in Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005) 52.

can they give in return for their life? 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.” 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.”

Introduction

As we begin this morning, I want you to keep in mind the timeframe of the last sentence I read. Jesus said that some will not see death until the kingdom of God comes with power. We'll come back to that at the end.

But for now we just need to acknowledge how hard it is to really look at the cross. We hang the cross in our churches and represent it visually in all manner of ways. We wear the cross as jewelry and sing songs about it. But we live so much in a culture of comfort that the actual way of the cross seems eerily irrelevant. A lot of churches today, especially some of the bigger ones, even teach that success, even *material* success, begins on Sunday. They might be churches Jack Welch would like. Many churches teach that if you are a Christian you will be a winner in everything.

But when Jesus talks about the cross, he doesn't seem to talk about winning. Only by losing — our lives for Jesus' sake — are we going to follow Jesus' way. The cross asks us bluntly, will our lives be faithful? In pondering that question, let's look at a couple of things. First, we are, sad to say, very much like the disciples.

ONE: We are like the disciples

I think the most amazing part of this text is when we read, “And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” Why in the world would Peter do that? Can you imagine the temerity and arrogance of Peter rebuking Jesus? The sheer cheekiness of it? It hadn't been that long since Jesus had called Peter to leave his fishing nets and to follow and fish for people. Peter had willingly done that. It hadn't been that long since Peter saw the miracles Jesus did: casting out demons, restoring a withered hand, stilling the storm, feeding the 5,000, healing a blind man, even healing Peter's own mother-in-law. Peter had witnessed all of that and more. Yet he had the gall to lecture Jesus about things divine and human.

Jesus did not respond gently. “You're acting like the Devil, Peter. You've got your mind on human things, not godly things.” Peter thought he knew about divine matters, things like glory and power. But Jesus says that God's way in the world is different. God's way is the way of the cross.

Maybe Peter's foolish remarks were just a onetime lapse. Maybe he was having a bad day or didn't have enough sleep the night before. Maybe he was just a little grouchy that day and he spoke before he really thought about it. It sure would be a lot easier on us if that were the case.

But Mark doesn't let us off the hook that easily. In chapter nine, just a few verses beyond today's text, Jesus' again predicts his suffering and death. But Mark says the disciples “did not understand what he was saying.” (9.32) Right after that, while walking to Capernaum, the disciples argued about which one of them was the greatest. Then in chapter ten, Jesus once more predicts his death and right afterwards a couple of disciples ask Jesus if they could sit at his right and left hands in glory. (10.37)

In other words, Mark makes it abundantly clear that the disciples are a little dense. They are

called into faith by Jesus, taught by Jesus, and led by Jesus. Yet time and time again they look in the wrong place and miss the whole point of what Jesus is about. Guess what? I suspect you and I are very much like the disciples.

TWO: Bearing the cross

So what does it mean for disciples to bear the cross? That's my second point today and it's a painful question even to ask. I remember several years ago teaching a morning Bible study when we studied this text. I remember because I sensed rather vividly some embarrassment about it. I think we knew it had implications that are difficult and painful to talk about because we don't like to think that God may be calling us to sacrifice and even suffer as Jesus did. In our awkwardness I think we were bearing witness to the English scholar G. K. Chesterton when he said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried."

To realize that Jesus calls us to take up our crosses and follow him is to face a painful truth: being a Christian is not belonging to a private club where we can gather with friends, sing some sweet songs, and have some nice religious feelings. If that's all we do, we prove what one person wrote: "I am convinced that often the world doesn't take Christians seriously because we are so much like the world; caught up in the same miserable rat race of self-seeking consumerism and materialism."²

Jesus' way seems so hard; like the world and like the disciples of old we often try to find an easier way. I confess that we preachers are constantly tempted to make the way of Jesus appear to be an easier way. We aid and abet the easier way.

William Willimon, whose sermons I read frequently, is former dean of the chapel at Duke University and now the bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. He once wrote that when he was in seminary, someone told them: "the preacher stands in the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and today's newspaper in the other. In 20 minutes, the preacher seeks to bring these two disparate worlds together." I remember being taught that too and also that Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the 20th century, is the one who first said it. But Willimon thinks it doesn't sound like Barth and he has never found it in Barth's writings. (Although Barth's writings take up whole shelves so Willimon might have missed it.) But Willimon also argues that even if the sainted Barth did say it, the metaphor is wrong.³

The metaphor is wrong because it suggests that the Bible is archaic and stodgy and somehow we have to make it relevant to the new world of today. And in trying to make it relevant we preachers are forever tempted to make the Bible easy, "to domesticate the gospel, to housebreak God, to produce a gospel that is honey for making the world's solutions go down easier."⁴ We are tempted to turn the gospel into a bumper sticker or a slogan.

The late Reuel Howe, an Episcopal theologian and psychologist, once interviewed laypeople and asked them what they thought about preaching. Howe wrote that the most frequently heard complaint was that sermons were too long on analysis of problems and too short on solutions. It

² Quoted in William H. Willimon, "The Way of the Cross," *Pulpit Resource* 25.1 (1997): 34.

³ William H. Willimon, "The Faith Gap," *Pulpit Resource* 31.1 (2003): 46.

⁴ Willimon, *Gap*, 46.

appears that people want sermons that, in 20 minutes or less, somehow provide resolution to life's conflicts and solutions to life's problems.⁵ In other words, easy answers.

It's constantly tempting to stand up here and try to make you feel good and to give you simple answers. In some ways that would be the easiest thing to do and part of me always wants to go that way. But then I remember that we are called to follow Jesus. We are called to be the company of the friends of Jesus and if we are going to be his friends, we must conform our lives to his, denying ourselves and being prepared to lose our lives, and take up our crosses. You have called me to speak the truth to you and if I ever stop speaking the truth to you, you better fire me.

But sometimes I would rather not speak the truth because speaking it means acknowledging my own failings. Because, you see, as one writer said, "The test of a preacher is that his congregation goes away saying not, 'What a lovely sermon!' but [rather] 'I will do something.'"⁶ So when a congregation fails the hard gospel — fails to do something — the preacher has to look not just at his people but very much at himself. That's not a comfortable thing to do. But Jesus calls us, not to comfort, but to a cross.

Conclusion

I asked you after I read the text to notice the timeframe of the passage. If you did, you will recall that Jesus concluded his teaching about the cross by talking about the end, the time of judgment when the kingdom of God will be revealed in power. He said that some who were there would not die until they saw the kingdom coming in power. Now, obviously, all those first disciples who were there that day have died. So when did they see the kingdom of God come in power?

The answer is painfully simple. The kingdom of God came in power when Jesus died on the cross and the kingdom of God continues to come in power whenever the friends of Jesus take up their crosses and follow him. For the cross of Christ *is* the power of God. This perspective shows up frequently in the New Testament. It's called eschatology which comes from the Greek word for *end*. To live eschatologically means we are to live in light of the end. Jesus gave us a way of living that reveals the end and will endure to the end. That way of living is the cross. The cross is God's way and looking to it, not away from it, is the one thing that guides us home.

Pittsburgh built a new international airport in 1992. Before that commercial planes landed at what is now called Allegheny County Airport. But I've read that just a few seconds flying time from that airport and in direct line of one of its busiest runways was the steeple of Union Church.

"When that runway was very busy," said the church pastor, "planes buzzed our belfry like bees after honey. The low-flying jets sounded so low that they turned our Sunday evening services into sudden prayer meetings." So to keep the planes from coming any lower, the church topped its steeple with an eight-foot neon-lighted cross.

That church steeple was the highest point near that airport and the lighted cross could be seen at night by planes all the way across the Ohio border. One airline pilot commented about the lighted cross: "Most of us are using it as a guide to the field."⁷

⁵ Reuel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967) 27.

⁶ St. Francis de Sales quoted in Willimon, *Cross*, 33.

⁷ This story was in my "sermon notes" file but I no longer know the source.

That's why we must look to the cross, my friends. If we will not accept a suffering God and what that means for how we must live, then we will not find our way home. Christ's way is the way of suffering which led to the cross. May we look to the cross for it will guide us home.

And so Reinhold Niebuhr, another great theologian of the 20th century prayed: "O Lord, who has taught us that to gain the whole world and to lose our souls is great folly, grant us the grace so to lose ourselves that we may truly find ourselves anew in the life of grace, and so to forget ourselves that we may be remembered in your kingdom."⁸

⁸ Quoted in Willimon, *Cross*, 34.