

Lent 2 B  
Mark 8:31-38  
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It's hard every year to stand up here and try to talk about than the kinds of things Jesus says during Lent. This place is hopping, full of positive energy, with all sorts of new people and Sunday School classes busting out of their rooms and little kids all over the place. There is a spirit that's gotten loose—maybe it's the economy, maybe it's just time. But something's shaken up, and it's exciting. So, far be it from me to want to climb up here and start talking about Jesus telling us to carry crosses and deny ourselves and even die. But in fact it is our task today to look more closely, to search out the good news Christ has for us. For I trust that all of us here have come to this place in one way or another looking for life, not entertainment. We seek the truth, not just a warm feeling.

Part of the truth today is that the discipleship Jesus puts before us doesn't make immediate sense to us. We have an encounter between Peter and Jesus, where Peter represents our misunderstanding. It starts just before today's reading, Peter identifies Jesus for the first time as the Messiah. Peter recognizes this in Jesus, and you might think this would be a big moment of rejoicing—Yea! They get it! Jesus is the Messiah! Yet Jesus tells him not to tell anyone. This happens throughout Mark's gospel, this secretiveness about who Jesus really is. He's always telling people, "Shhh. Don't tell anyone. Go home. Don't tell." It's so strange—aren't we supposed to tell everyone we see about Jesus?

In today's passage we get part of the reason for that silence. At this point in the gospel story, Jesus has been doing all these wonderful works of healing and teaching and feeding thousands of people. And folks watching were really starting to think that he was the one who would be their anointed king, who would put Israel back up where it used to be, back up there as a world power, instead of a two-bit country handed over from one occupying army to another. People saw what Jesus was doing and thought, all right. Our time is here, and Jesus is the one who's going to make it happen. Didn't he say that the kingdom of God is at hand? The Messiah is going to get up on his horse and run these pagan, idol-worshipping Romans out.

Well, their time was coming, all right, but it wasn't going to look the way they thought. Peter utters the words, "You are the Messiah," and Jesus responds, "Right, and just so you know, what that means is that I'm going to suffer, and our own leaders are going to reject me and kill me. And then three days later I'll rise again." And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. This is the same word for what Jesus does to demons and evil spirits. You can't really overstate the outrage this would be, for Peter as disciple to speak this way to his teacher. So violent is his response to the thought that this might be Jesus' future, that he assumes Jesus must be crazy, possessed. Some devil spirit has gotten into Jesus, to make him talk like that.

Suffer, and be rejected, and die. Now, which one of us here showed up looking for that? But as Jesus replies to Peter, he looks at his disciples, the text says—maybe he sighs deeply or rolls his eyes, or just wants to make sure they're paying attention. And he rebukes Peter right back and says, you're the one with the devil spirit. To think

that the Messiah will not have to suffer and die is to align yourself with the wrong side of this issue. Jesus told people to keep quiet about who he really was, because there was no way they were going to understand him as Messiah until they'd walked through both Good Friday and Easter. For the people of the gospel, the cross was still just a means of punishment, the equivalent of our death by lethal injection. The cross was horrifying to bring up in conversation; it was not yet a piece of jewelry, not yet a status symbol. The cross had to happen before the people could get what the real Messiah looked like.

A lot of times we hear the death language in what Jesus says, the challenge inherent in it, and it's so drastic that we can't get our minds around it, and so we just leave it there and walk away. There is good evidence showing that for early Christians, following Jesus was a life-or-death matter. We know of men and women who were martyred for their faith, who gave up their lives. And there are martyrs today, too, in other parts of the world, people who die physical death because they are Christian. For us, though, physical death is not required of us; this saying of Jesus must mean something else. It must refer to some other sort of death for us.

Maybe it's the death of easy social standing. Maybe it means praying for or taking up for somebody everybody else would just as soon be done with. Here's a conversation stopper: The state of Texas has executed 10 men since the beginning of the year, and two more are scheduled for this week. Why would we have any concern for them? Aren't they just getting what they deserve? Whatever the circumstance of their crime or imprisonment, they are the ones alongside whom Jesus hung and finally

died. I dare say he would have us listen to their voices. But taking up concern for that kind of people is taking up a cross.

Maybe death looks like that for us, or maybe it's something internal; maybe it's denying ourselves by losing a part of our lives that's actually killing us. One of our adult Sunday School classes is studying the effects of the hurried life on marriage and the family. The speed with which we live our lives is absolutely deadening. It breaks down our relationships with other people and with God. Our hurriedness keeps us from listening, keeps us from seeing, keeps us from feeling. It's a way of staying disconnected, protecting ourselves from intimacy, living in a place that is not in fact real. You can't experience true joy or blessing when you're moving at a hundred miles an hour. So why do we do it? Because slowing down also opens us to pain in ourselves and others, to the imperfect nature of our lives, to our dependence and our need of things we can't do for ourselves. Giving up the rush can be a tough thing. It can even be a way of taking up a cross.

But the good news today is through the life and work of Christ, the cross has become for us the pathway to wholeness. Even as the cross holds death for us, it also holds life. Jesus says, "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." He asks us, his disciples, to lay down our life, because the way we live is killing us and other people. We have to lay down this life to make room for real life—as people who are connected, people who listen and see and allow intimacy, people who are vulnerable and dependent upon God and one another; people who allow our common brokenness and

dependence to draw us together rather than dividing us. This is what it is to take up the cross. This is what it is to lose your life for Jesus' sake.

We know what Good Friday looked like, and we shudder to think of that kind of suffering. To deny ourselves and lose our lives for Jesus' sake looks like too tall an order. But for better or worse, much of the time Christian discipleship will not call for our literal martyrdom. The great preacher Fred Craddock said, "We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table—"Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all." But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there... Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time." (*NIB, Volume VIII*, p. 629)

Deny yourself, and take up the cross of Jesus. For in his death and in your own, you will find life.