

What Cross?

Mark 8:27-38

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Dr. Sharlyn Gates

One of the things that stands out with Mark's gospel is that Jesus and his disciples are always "on the way." This story is about a journey and all that happens on the way to the destination, which we know will be Jerusalem and ultimately the cross. But a lot significant events happen on the way to the cross.

Mark starts his gospel off by proclaiming, that this is: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark is all about identifying just who this Jesus is, and what it means to call him *Christ*.

Up until this chapter, Jesus and the disciples have been hanging out around the Sea of Galilee; out in small boats, or in the wilderness. But this is a pivotal place that we are seeing in this text. This marks about half way through the journey for Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples are in the northern most territories of Israel, where the population of Gentiles – that is non-Jewish people (and for the most part, non believers in one God) – is much heavier.

Their journey will soon begin going south, from the outer edges of Israel, finally leading on to Jerusalem.

Up until now, there is no other time where the name *Christ (Christos)* is written, or uttered. But here we have Jesus asking his disciples as they are walking along, "What are you hearing? Who do the people say I am?"

There were different answers. The disciples said some say, "Elijah." Some think you are "John the Baptist." And another was "A prophet."

People were speculating, wondering. Thinking Jesus was perhaps a forerunner to the Messiah (which in Greek is *Christ* – or *Christos*).

And then Jesus asked them the question: "And who do you say I am?"

Peter was the first to proclaim, "You are the Messiah! You are the Christ! Sent from God."

Yay Peter! To be the first one to identify Jesus as the Christ, the long awaited Messiah – that had to feel kind of good. He probably felt in awe ... and maybe a little proud of himself, too.

But the big question is – What does it mean to be the Christ?

I'd like to take a couple of minutes to hear from you. What do you think it means for Jesus to be the Christ? The Messiah? What does it mean to you?

Apparently, Peter did not like Jesus' description of what it meant to be the Messiah, did he? Jesus starts telling them about what is going to happen to him. That he, the Christ, will suffer greatly and will be rejected by all the leaders of Israel and that he would die.

He did also say he would rise again in three days, but they were so hung up on the first part of his announcement, it seems they did not hear that last bit of amazing news. If Peter was proud of himself at all, that pride was surely was knocked down by Jesus' harsh words. We really don't hear Jesus say anything that sounds quite as harsh as his admonishing Peter does. He compares Peter to Satan, telling him to get behind him. And if we remember Jesus in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan, we can begin to understand why he is so harsh.

The thing is, Peter's idea of a Messiah, was not in line with what Jesus knew had to be. Instead of the powerful, strong leader who would overtake the enemies, Jesus sounds weak and almost helpless. A lot of people were disappointed in who this Christ turned out to be, you know.

And it's kind of important for us today, don't you think, to come to terms with who Jesus is for us? I mean, if we are authentic in professing to follow Jesus, don't we need to be sure of really knowing who it is we follow? Doesn't following mean that we model our lives after him?

See, there can be a difference in being a disciple and being a follower. Lots of people have been disciples. They choose to be a student, studying and learning about their leader, whether it be a rabbi or a guru, or – Jesus.

But, just because you study them and learn about what they stand for, what they believe in, that doesn't make you a follower, does it? There are, in fact, many who say they are atheists, who know a great deal about Jesus of the Bible. They learned about him, but they sure don't choose to follow him. In fact, they made an intentional decision NOT to follow him.

But Jesus says if you want to follow me, you must learn who I am, how I live my life, and you too, must take up your cross and follow me ... live your life in the way I do.

Take up our cross? What cross? We have never seen a cross in our postmodern lives, except the ones we put around our necks or have on the Communion Table – shiny and gold – certainly not the kind of cross Jesus died on.

This life of following Jesus is paradoxical. Jesus says if you want to save your life, you must lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it.

In other words, it's about turning from being an *all about me* kind of person, to an *all about others* kind of person. It's about self denial instead of me trying to get myself ahead. It's about thinking about how Jesus would respond to people in all different walks of life – people of color, people who are very different from us, people who need so much compassion.

It's about relationship and compassion and sacrifice. About acknowledging the pain and suffering we see in the world, and somehow engaging in that pain and suffering with them.

Where do you see pain and suffering in our world right now?

I can't help but want to cry when I see all the refugees who have fled Syria, trying to get their families away from the terror of Isis, only to end up losing children and wives or husbands, or entire families before getting to a safe place.

And where is that safe place? No one wants them. They end up in camps like prisoners. Little children crying with fear and hunger and uncertainty. Humans who are desperate for help. I wonder what Jesus would do? What Jesus would have *us* do?

There is definitely suffering in so many places where we look. And I believe if we claim to follow Jesus, we'd better understand what that means – who we are following – and we had better figure out what to do.

I saw a little cartoon on social media the other day. A man was sitting with Jesus and asked: "Why do you allow things like famine, war, suffering, disease, homelessness, etc. in the world?"

Jesus answers, "Interesting that you should bring that up. I was just about to ask you the exact same question!"

More and more, I wonder if the church is kind of doing things inside out. We have worked for years and years to get people to come into our space. Yet, we know our churches are getting smaller all the time.

But isn't our mission as followers – as the Church of Jesus Christ – the suffering servant, who carried his cross to die for us so we might have life – isn't the church called to be missional – to go OUT to the world, even more than to be inside the walls that protect us and shield us from so much suffering in the world?

It is really good to have a place to come together, to worship and praise God for what he has done for all the world, through Jesus, his Son. It's good to have this place where we can learn together just who this man, this Christ Jesus is, so that we know for sure he *is* who we want to follow.

But, I wonder sometimes if we have made it more about being inside our walls than going out into our neighborhood, our community, into the world.

What does it really look like to take up our cross? Is it an individual cross, or is it more a community cross? Do we have any idea what is happening in our neighborhood around us? Are we aware of how our neighbors might be suffering?

Is there anything we, as a congregation of followers of Jesus Christ might offer them, as an extension of love and compassion – no strings attached; no bargaining with them to come into our space, but us just going to their space, in the name of Jesus, whom we follow?

I think we should ask ourselves if our meetings and plans are focused on the mission field around us. Are we thinking about ourselves too much? How we can grow in numbers, how we can survive as a small church when we hear of so many who are dying?

Are we showing the world – our neighbors, our community, the world of people hurting – are we showing the same devotion when we go out there, as we show when we are in here?

I don't want you to think that I'm making little of the work you do. Our teams work so hard I often fear you are getting burned out; too few people with too much to do.

But I do think it is very important that we keep looking at our mission, at our priorities, at our call as followers, as true disciples. Notice, this word from Jesus about taking up your cross, about following him, about giving up self for others, this was not just for his chosen twelve to hear. Notice, Jesus called the crowd of people to come close so they could hear it as well.

In other words, these words *are* for leaders – pastors and elders and teachers – but this is a word from Jesus for *ALL* people who profess to follow him.

It's a choice. We have to decide what the cross is that we will carry. WE have to decide, as a congregation, how much self sacrifice we are willing to make in the name of Christ.

And I end this with the sobering words of Jesus. "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."

What does it mean to be adulterous? Maybe Jesus isn't talking about adultery as we think of it. Maybe he doesn't mean people having affairs with someone outside of their marriage.

Maybe Jesus is talking about people who have made a commitment – a covenant with God – to follow Jesus all the way, as we promise to do at our baptism – yet keep putting self before him, and his call to live in that paradox where we lose our lives (self denial) to gain real life.

In all our efforts as this new season begins for us, may we keep in the forefront of all we do, all we teach, and all we say, that Jesus calls us to go out and take him with us.

Let us give thanks for this sacred space for worship and learning and growing, but let us not get so comfortable that we don't want to go out into the mission field that is all around us.

What cross? It is a question to keep praying about and to be willing to take it up.

Amen.

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