

Count The Cost
September 16, 2018
Mark 8:34-9:1, Philippians 2:25-30
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
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<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/sermon09-16-2018.mp3>



¹Last week we picked up in our exploration of Mark's Gospel by noting that the middle of Chapter 8 is essentially the opening episode in "Season II" of the Jesus story. We noted that Jesus has taken the group to the farthest reaches of Jewish territory, in the community of Caesarea Philippi along the Lebanese border. In this remote location, Peter almost hits one out of the park when he acclaims Jesus as the Messiah, but then loses his footing when he denies Jesus the opportunity to define what "Messiah" and "Savior" mean.

In this way, Peter is actually echoing something that had happened in the last episode of "season I". You'll remember that on their way to Caesarea Philippi the band stopped in a place called Bethsaida. As they went through, Jesus encountered a blind man and we heard a remarkable story of a two-stage healing. Jesus touched him, and he could see – but not perfectly. He reported that human beings looked like trees to him. It took another touch of the Savior's hands to bring complete clarity to the man.

I'd like to suggest that last week's reading in which Peter acclaims Jesus as the Messiah, but then turns around and needs to be set straight almost right away is an echo of that healing. Peter could see, but it was imperfect. Like the sightless man in Bethsaida, he needed the "second touch".

In our reading for today, Jesus continues to elaborate for Peter and the rest of the group what it will mean to live a life of

¹ *What Do People Think About Me?*, Vasely Polenov (c. 1900)

faithful discipleship. As he first instructed Peter to “Get behind me!” in v. 33, he now uses the same exact word in telling those around him that discipleship is all about following. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” “Follow me” is the same word in Greek as “get behind me.” The life of discipleship is all about perspective – and the Lord is saying that if we define ourselves as his “followers” it can only make sense if we are willing to, well, *follow* him.

I’d like to suggest that Jesus chose this remote place in Northern Israel to bring forward what might be the hardest part of his teaching on discipleship. He’s starting, not with the crowds that might have adored him in his home town, nor with the masses who were happy to accept a free lunch, but with those hardy folk who had engaged in a long and circuitous route to this town somewhere past the middle of nowhere.

“If you want to get serious,” Jesus said, “You have to talk about discipleship.” And, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

The first Christ-suffering which everyone must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is the death of the old self which is the result of one’s encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death – we give over our lives to death... When Christ calls to us, he bids us come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old self at Christ’s call.²

² *The Cost of Discipleship*, MacMillan paperback 1963, p. 99 (edited for gender inclusivity).



In the first teaching on discipleship after accepting the acclamation of Peter and designating himself “the Son of Man”, Jesus points out that discipleship by its very definition means giving up our ability or perceived need to set the direction, to be in charge, or to “call the shots”. The beginning of a walk in faith, then, is to yield to God in all things.

We are called let go of our fear. We are called to seek God’s best in the reality of each new day. And we are called to a denial of self.

I want to point out here that when Jesus talks about denying oneself, he does not say “deny some things to yourself” (the English majors amongst us will realize that is making the self an indirect object). If we were to read it that way, we might be tempted to think that there is some real chance that God might be impressed by my ability to “just say no” to sweet treats or fancy cars or front-row seats at the game.

No, he says, “deny yourself.” The “self” is the direct object. There are only two objects here – the self and the Christ. In order to follow the one, I must deny, or leave, or turn away from the other. Following Jesus means a willingness to relinquish life on my own terms and to stop pursuing my own ends.

I’d like to take advantage of this moment to point out that none of this ought to be a surprise to anyone who has sought to be a disciple of Jesus here in Crafton Heights. On the day that you were born – some of you, anyway – I read from Psalm 139 and reminded you that you were not an accident of nature nor are you the result of some careful human design. In that scripture we heard – again – that you were *made*. You were made fearfully and wonderfully in the Divine image. You were given an identity by your Creator.

A central task of the Christian life is discovering what it means to be faithful to God in the context of the image that has

been given; I am called to discern, understand, and seek out what it means to be the me who is at this place and this time, and that can be hard work. But I never, ever have to *invent* an identity. I live a life of faith in which I seek to discover how to be the self that God made me to be.

And now, you might be thinking, “All right, Dave, this is interesting – or at least, it’s not deathly boring... But what does it look like in real life? Give us an example.”

I’m glad you asked! Let me tell you a little bit about a hero named Epaphroditus. Do you know that I have at least two books on my shelves which claim to be some version of *Who’s Who in the Bible* – and yet neither one of them mentions this young man who was commended by Paul in Philippians 2. Listen:

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me. (Philippians 2:25-30)



I wonder – is there anyone here who has heard of this man before? I’m here to tell you he is an amazing example of the self-denying, Christ-serving disciple of which Jesus spoke in Mark 8. Paul has been imprisoned for some time, and the church in Philippi has become concerned for his welfare. It’s not practical or possible for the entire congregation to go and check on the old Apostle, so Epaphroditus

volunteers to go. He finds Paul in a tough spot, and immediately dives in to try to make life better for Paul. He does, but in the process he loses his own health and in fact nearly dies. Through prayer and the care of others, the young man's health is restored and now Paul is sending him back to the church in Philippi, full of news and encouragement. And please note that when Paul sends him back he does so with a lot of powerful words: Epaphroditus is an apostle, a fellow worker, a soldier for the Lord. He proves this, says Paul, because he was willing to serve Jesus even at risk to himself. In fact, Paul chooses to use a word here that is used only this once in the entire Bible: he says that Epaphroditus "risked his life" or "exposed his life" for the sake of the gospel: the word is *paraballo*. Can you see how in this little story from his own files, Paul gives us a great description of one who lived into the narrative of Mark 8? That Epaphroditus was more concerned about following Jesus in the service of others than he was about saving his own neck?

That might be interesting enough, but then in the fifth century we find a couple of very curious references to an order of disciples who were called the *Parabolani*. From what we can tell, this group began as a community of Christ-followers who saw their special mission as being to care for the sick – even at risk to themselves. The *Parabolani* were so eager to reach out to those on the margins that they walked freely amongst those with deadly and communicative diseases offering the same hope and love and care as Epaphroditus gave to Paul. Isn't that awesome?

Yes. Almost. But something happened.

The longer this small society pursued this mission, the more difficult it became. As they became more well-known, they were revered and honored. They were admired. Soon, someone would see one or two of them walking down the street wearing the little emblem of the *Parabolani* and a crowd would gather. "Hey, guys – seriously – thanks for all you do. We don't know what we'd do without you. The world is better because you're here..."

Along the way, in addition to being respected and admired, some fear crept in. It may have been well-placed; I mean, if I think you've been out treating people with tuberculosis or hepatitis I am not sure that I want you making my tuna salad sandwich... So eventually the bands of *Parabolani* created a bit of a stir wherever they showed up.

Maybe you can guess where this is leading. It didn't take all that much time for the group that had been established on the basis of selfless and anonymous service to those who were in horrible places to become transformed into a "goon squad" of enforcers sent out by the religious establishment. The last mention of the *Parabolani* indicates that the local Bishop had them show up at a council meeting in order to ensure that everything went the way that the Bishop wanted...

Isn't that the way of things? We come to Christ, and we seek healing and life and we find hope and we are filled with joy that we didn't think we could know. We dive into the life of discipleship – sometimes by means of denying ourselves. We yield privileges. We give up what we want for the good of the group and the joy of our neighbor.

And sometimes, when we do this, people notice. And they mention it. And the first few times, I protest: "Ah, don't mention it," I say. "It's nothing."

But inside, it feels pretty good to be noticed. In fact, I like it. I like it so much that I keep on doing those things that show me as kind and compassionate and caring... and I do them in places where you can see me, and where you can affirm me for it. That kind of affirmation can be like a drug to me, and I crave it. I start to abuse it. And before you know it, I've left Christ behind me.

You've seen it. The person who started an incredible charity for the homeless is revealed to be living in a mansion that costs millions of dollars. The youth worker who started out wanting nothing more than to help kids discover the love of Jesus winds

up “falling in love” with some fourteen year-old and using that child to fill some perceived need in his life... The so-called “suffering servant” at the church who doesn’t mind doing all of the lowly jobs as long as he gets noticed doing them, credited for taking care of them, and thanked for being so humble and selfless.



Does any of that sound familiar to you? Because it seems to me like a lot of that is my story over and over again. This is, for me, the hardest part of discipleship – wanting to want the right things for the right reasons. Wanting to stay in line behind Jesus, rather than getting out where you can see how good, how noble, how “Christ-like” I am. For crying out loud, Dave, let them see Jesus – not you!

The path of discipleship may begin with something specific. Maybe you remember one day when you “asked Jesus to come into your heart”. Maybe you woke up in a fog, not remembering where you’d been the night before, and you said, “That’s enough. Starting now, things are going to be different.”

In that way, following Jesus is a lot like any other relationship: it began with a simple act, a specific conversation, a seemingly “chance” meeting. All of our relationships are like that – friendships and marriages and parenting – they all begin with something that is observable. And yet each of them requires the daily, if not hourly, embrace of a set of behaviors and ideals and commitments. The life of discipleship requires that we constantly and consistently turn our eyes to the man who went to the cross. Sitting amidst the symbols of power and wealth in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus looks us in the eyes and says, plainly, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”*

That does not mean that we quietly walk towards oblivion because we are not important. Rather, as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write in *Resident Aliens*, "...the cross is a sign of what happens when one takes God's account of reality more seriously than Caesar's. The cross stands as God's (and our) eternal no to the powers of death, as well as God's eternal yes to humanity, God's remarkable determination not to leave us to our own devices."³

In my discipleship, I am invited and called to live for Jesus in hope and in victory every day, not because of how good, noble, or holy I am or think that I am; but because he knows me, he formed me, he shaped me, and he invited me to follow him into goodness, nobility, and holiness. As a disciple, I've just got to remember my place. Thanks be to God! Amen.

³ *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon, 1989), p. 47.