

Embracing Jesus: Embracing the Cross

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Mark 8:31-38

The episode in Mark that we just heard immediately precedes Jesus' transfiguration at the top of a high mountain. As you might recall from the sermon two weeks ago, the transfiguration was a critical moment, a true turning point, for Jesus and his followers. Once they descended that mountain, the difficult road to Jerusalem stretched out before them. But the episode we just heard shows that what immediately preceded their ascent up the mountain of transfiguration was no cake walk either. Mark reveals mounting tension between Jesus and his followers and Jesus and the same political and religious leaders he will continue to confront in and on the way to Jerusalem. At the center of the tension lies the heart of the gospel itself. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

It is important to look at three incidents leading up to this morning's gospel passage because they set the stage for how Jesus responded to Peter and what he said to the larger crowd of followers. If you like, follow along with me in your Bibles. Please turn to Mark 8, which is on page 820 in the pew Bibles and begin with me at verse 11.

11 The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. ¹²And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, 'Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.' ¹³And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

Clearly, there is little love lost between the Pharisees and Jesus. For their part, the Pharisees have come to argue with Jesus, as they so often did. On the way to Jerusalem, they tried to ambush Jesus with baited theological questions about divorce. In Jerusalem the attempt to entrap is more political, testing his openness to cooperation with Rome: "*Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?*" And here was another test. They were clearly out to get him.

For his part, Jesus responds to their question here about a sign from heaven with what Mark calls a "deep sigh from within his spirit." I can easily imagine Jesus frowning and shaking his head as he "*sighed deeply.*" Knowing their true intent, he declared that no sign will be given to them or their generation and then spun around and left them standing alone with their thoughts as he got into a boat with his disciples, crossing to the other side. Clearly, the tension is thick between Jesus and the Pharisees.

On the boat to the other side, Mark follows this dispute with another one between Jesus and the disciples, seemingly about loaves of bread. This is not an easy day for Jesus. Follow along with me beginning with verse 14.

14 Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵And he cautioned them, saying, 'Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.'* ¹⁶They said to one another, 'It is because we have no bread.' ¹⁷And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' They said to him, 'Twelve.' ²⁰'And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' And they said to him, 'Seven.' ²¹Then he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'*

This incident begins with a seemingly innocuous observation by Mark. The disciples forgot to bring any bread with them and there was only one loaf in the boat. Jesus overheard their murmuring and decided to use it as a teaching moment following up on what had just transpired with the Pharisees. Watch out, he said, beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod! This, “watch out, beware,” is used by Mark only two other times in his gospel and each time singles out powerful opponents of the kingdom.

The Pharisee/Herodian coalition first appeared early on in Mark following Jesus' breaking of the Sabbath no-work law. They immediately thereafter conspired to destroy Jesus, Mark tells us. Later on they ganged up on Jesus to try to entrap him on paying taxes to Rome, as I mentioned before. We can find similar coalitions today: the makers and defenders of laws—the Pharisees—siding with those invested in maintaining their class status through collaboration with the ruling authorities—the Herodians. Far better than the disciples, the Pharisees and Herodians perceived the threat that Jesus and his kingdom was to them and their social order, and Jesus warned the closest of his followers to watch out for them. Beware of their yeast.

I doubt that I would have been any more perceptive than the disciples were. They responded to Jesus' double warning by looking at each other and saying, “Huh? What's he talking about? Is he saying that because we didn't bring along any bread”?

Jesus responded to their dullness of mind with great frustration. The people he's spent nearly three years teaching and preparing, those to whom he will entrust the keys to the kingdom, still don't get it. Do you really think I'm just talking about bread!? Do you still not understand!? Are your hearts hardened!? Can't you see!? Can't you hear!?

The issue of Jesus' identity has been lingering in the background of Mark's gospel for a while. It first popped up in 4:41 after Jesus stilled the storm that threatened to capsize their boat. His companions, we are told, were filled with great awe. Who is it that even the wind and sea

obey him? And then, in 6:3, after teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth, those present derisively questioned who he is. But here, Jesus addressed the question head on.

In verse 27, he asked his disciples: “*Who do people say that I am?*” What do you hear them say? Their reply reflected Jesus’ widespread popularity—John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. There was much speculation among the crowds that came to him. Then he asked the far more important question: “*But who do you say that I am?*”

Peter immediately and unambiguously hailed Jesus as the Messiah and in so doing he introduced that politically loaded term for the first time in Mark. Messiah was widely perceived to be the royal figure that will come and restore the fortunes of Israel. In declaring Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, Peter was saying that the triumphant revolution is at hand and he fully expected Jesus to lead it. Probably to Peter’s chagrin, Jesus does not affirm his proclamation. Instead, Jesus simply and sternly replies, “Don’t tell anyone; don’t say a word.”

Enemies out to kill him, friends who don’t understand him, the only true insight they have, that he is the Messiah, misdirected in its grasp, Jesus decided to unambiguously declare who he is, which leads to our passage this morning, beginning with verse 31:

31 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.

Jesus emphasized that the Messiah, contrary to popular belief, will be rejected by the leaders and put to death, adding, almost as an afterthought, that three days later he will rise again. But it is what he first said that incensed Peter, who will have no part of Jesus’ messianic revisionism.

Mark continues:

³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.’

Peter was deeply concerned that Jesus was saying this openly, to everyone, and so he took Jesus aside to privately rebuke him. But Jesus stopped Peter just as he began. Jesus turned to his disciples and strongly rebuked Peter with the words, “*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*”

The word used here, “to rebuke,” is significant. It occurs twice in this passage, first to state what Peter did to Jesus and then to describe what Jesus did to Peter. Elsewhere in Mark the verb is used to say what Jesus did to the demons he reproached in exorcism. To rebuke is to confront and condemn with the purpose of effecting radical change. Clearly, Peter’s understanding of the Messiah is way off base.

What Jesus then says next is of critical importance, because it strikes at the heart of what it means to be a true follower of Jesus, to embrace Jesus. It is central to what it meant then, and what it means today, to confess Jesus as Lord. Beginning with verse 34:

34 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. 35 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.*

Jesus didn't say it to his disciples alone. He called the entire crowd that was with him together and said it to them, and I repeat: *"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."*

Jesus has now spoken the word of the cross openly and he has tied it to the meaning of discipleship. If you want to follow me, take up your cross. Now think for a moment what the meaning of the cross had for those who were listening to Jesus and for those who were reading Mark's gospel tract some thirty years or so later. Ched Myers, I think rightly, puts it this way: "The cross in Mark's day was neither religious icon nor metaphor for personal anguish or humility. It had only one meaning: that terrible form of capital punishment reserved by imperial Rome for political dissenters." Myers goes on: "The cross was a common sight in the revolutionary Palestine of Mark's time; in this recruiting call, the disciple is invited to reckon with the consequences facing those who dare to challenge the hegemony of imperial Rome."

John Howard Yoder agrees. When Yoder comments on this passage about the meaning of the cross in *The Politics of Jesus*, he writes this: "The death of Jesus...centers upon the renunciation of lordship, the abandonment of earthly security, the threat which the Suffering Servant poses to the powers of this world, and the antagonism of the world's response."

With this teaching, the cost of discipleship just got much, much bigger. Embracing Jesus means embracing that cross. Mark doesn't say it, but I suspect that after this conflicted teaching, the crowds around Jesus got smaller and smaller.

I know this is not new stuff for us here at Hyattsville Mennonite. I know most people in this room, if not every person, have stories to tell of personal sacrifice in the choices we've made to follow Jesus. But I want to push us this morning to keep thinking about the meaning of the cross for each of us, especially during this season of Lent, and I want to do so with two examples as I close.

The first, of course, is the very recent martyrdom of our brother Tom Fox. Tom was a pretty ordinary guy with an extraordinary faith in the efficacy of nonviolent peacemaking. It took him to places of deep international conflict with Christian Peacemaker Teams, as it has for

members of our congregation, including Jenny Dillon who is in Colombia right now with CPT. Tom's commitment to being a vulnerable nonviolent presence in Iraq ended with his execution. As I understand it, his body bore the marks of bullet wounds to the head and chest. It may ultimately also do so for the three brothers still held captive. What does Tom's witness and that of so many others say to you and to us about taking up the cross and following Jesus?

The second example concerns an immigration bill now before Congress that may end up seriously impacting our life together. The House of Representatives recently passed an immigration bill that is now being considered by the Senate. If the bill becomes law in its present form, it could mean that it is illegal to help any undocumented resident in the United States. While it is not impossible, I think it is unlikely that the current bill will become law. Senator Arlen Specter is sponsoring a less provocative alternative that the Bush administration seems to support. While allowing limited amnesty for a period of time, criminal penalties in Specter's version would still be imposed on anyone who would house, feed or support what are termed "illegal aliens." Senators Ted Kennedy and John McCain are co-sponsoring another more just bill that would allow amnesty and a path for citizenship or a green card, if desired.

If the passed version of this immigration bill carries criminal penalties against harboring and caring for undocumented residents, we here at Hyattsville may be subject to prosecution. I know in the early 1980s this congregation became a Sanctuary Church. Since then, undocumented people have passed through our midst and continue to do so. If the bill contains those criminal sanctions, I firmly believe that we will not stand for the state defining for us the nature of our pastoral care and preventing us from following the biblical call to care for and take in the "alien" in our midst. It is my conviction that if such a bill is passed we should and will defy the law.

But we would not be alone. In the Pacific Southwest Conference of MC USA, eighty-six percent of their members were born outside of the U.S. and this law would affect them deeply. As Jeff Wright, Conference Minister put it a couple of weeks ago: "We will commit civil disobedience. Fifty pastors will go to jail. We will not tolerate criminalizing pastoral work." Mennonites would, of course, not be alone. Cardinal Roger Mahony, Catholic Archbishop of Los Angeles, recently told the Los Angeles Times that he would instruct priests to defy legislation—if approved by Congress—that would require churches and other social organizations to ask immigrants for legal documentation before providing assistance and penalize them if they refuse to do so."

In what new ways does it mean for each of us to take up our cross and follow Christ? How can we, as a congregation, more tightly embrace Jesus? Individually and together, let's keep probing the answer to those questions.