

Sermon
Second Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 25, 2024
10am

Text: Mark 8:31-9:9

Theme: The Shadow of Ignorance

[prayer]

This is a sermon where I throw several quotes at you from a bunch of different people, not because I am lazy, but because it was one of those weeks where everywhere I turned the Holy Spirit was creating connections to our Scripture passage.

Here is quote #1: “Ignorance is bliss.” It was coined by English poet Thomas Gray in 1742. A much older saying from the first century goes “In knowing nothing, life is most delightful.”

I get great delight from knowing things, so I am skeptical of that statement. But as they watched Jesus die on a Roman cross, Peter and the other disciples probably wished they could have remained ignorant of some of his teachings, especially this one: “The Human One [Son of Man] must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead” (Mark 8:31 CEB). Mark says that Jesus spoke plainly. Peter responded to his candidness by pulling Jesus aside and rebuking him for what he said.

“Rebuke” is a strong word. It means to express sharp disapproval or criticism. The Greek word, *epitimaō*, is used elsewhere in Scripture to silence demons. Consider the arrogance Peter displays when he rebukes Jesus – daring to correct the Messiah on what it means to be the Messiah!

But isn't ignorance so often expressed as arrogance? I think of the times I am most arrogant, usually when I am passing judgment on another person or group of people. My arrogance betrays my ignorance about what their life is really like. I am especially prone to do this with people or topics I have read about, or heard a

news report on, but have no personal relationship with. Until we have walked a mile in another person's shoes, we lack the *experience* necessary to pass judgment.

Peter *thinks* he knows what it means to be the Messiah. Just prior to this episode Jesus asks, "Who do *you* say I am?" Peter answers him clear-eyed and bold: "You are the Christ." (Mark 8:27-30)

The trouble is that when Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah, he has a particular agenda in mind. The Messiah is a warrior who will liberate Israel from Roman occupation. He will gather an army strong enough to take on the legions of Rome. He will defeat Israel's enemies, purge her of ungodly Gentiles, and reestablish David's throne in Jerusalem.

Peter cannot imagine the kind of Messiah Jesus is describing – a Messiah who suffers and dies. Who would follow *this* Messiah? A Messiah who dies at the hands of his enemies is no Messiah at all! Peter is blinded by his preconceptions and cherished convictions, so blinded, in fact, that he cannot see the good news in Jesus' teaching – that after his suffering and death, the Messiah will rise from the dead.

Let's not pretend we are better than Peter. We may not have the temerity to rebuke Jesus with harsh words, but we frequently do it with our actions. Anytime we choose our personal agenda over God's agenda we rebuke Jesus. When we do this, we effectively deny Jesus as Messiah. We confess him with our mouths but deny him with our actions.

This hypocrisy is especially prevalent among Christians in our country right now. Russell Moore, the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today* and a former top official in the Southern Baptist Convention, was interviewed by NPR last year about why he thinks American Christianity is in crisis. He said, "It was the result of having multiple pastors tell me...the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount...[and having] someone come up after [and] say, 'Where did you get those liberal talking points?' And what was alarming to me is that in most of these scenarios, when the pastor would say, 'I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ'...the response would be, 'Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak.'"¹

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/08/1192663920/southern-baptist-convention-donald-trump-christianity>

The Rev. Benjamin Cremer puts it another way: “When gentleness starts to sound like a weakness to us Christians rather than a fruit of the Spirit, that is when we know power has become an idol for us.”²

The great reformer Martin Luther wrote about the theology of glory versus the theology of the cross. The theology of glory confirms what people want in a god, that the way to victory is through power and might. But God reveals himself in Jesus through the weakness of suffering and death. This is the theology of the cross. It was scandalous in Jesus’ time and apparently it is still scandalous today, otherwise we wouldn’t have Christians calling the Sermon on the Mount “weak.” But I think, deep down, all of us struggle with that scandal. Everything about our world screams might is right. Only the strong survive. The paradox of the cross feels impractical.

Jesus responds to Peter’s rebuke with a harsher rebuke of his own (one of my favorite lines in Scripture): “Get behind me, Satan! You are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts” (8:33). Jesus wants Peter and the other disciples to understand this: *If you profess to follow me but reject the ways of my Father’s kingdom, then you also reject me. And if you reject me, then your allegiance is with the devil himself. There is no neutral ground here.*

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Satan, that great Deceiver, is out to tempt Jesus and his disciples into believing that the Messiah is something other than a suffering servant. The healings and exorcisms and miracles Jesus performs are not the main act, but the preface to it. They foreshadow the suffering compassion that Jesus will pour out on the cross and the victorious resurrection that will follow. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus demonstrates that God’s kingdom is not a kingdom of political and military power. Instead, it is a kingdom founded on self-sacrificial love.

[pause]

Six days later, Jesus leads Peter, James, and John up the Mount of Transfiguration. The cloud that overshadows them evokes the presence of God on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:15-18). There God sought to remove the Israelite’s ignorance about how to love and obey the LORD by giving them the Law. The prophets sought to interpret

² <https://www.facebook.com/ben.cremer>

this Law. On the Mount of Transfiguration, with Moses (who represents the Law) on one hand and Elijah (who represents the prophets) on the other, God presents Jesus as the summation of both. “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7) The words of divine affirmation that were once spoken only to Jesus at his baptism are now loud enough for the disciples to hear. *Yes, Peter...you are correct. This is the Messiah. Now...listen to him!* A command and a rebuke rolled into one. On the Mount of Transfiguration, God shows Peter and all of us that if we want to love and obey the LORD, we must listen to Jesus.

The transfiguration is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ glorification at his resurrection. One day all power on heaven and earth will belong to him. But this glory will only come through the suffering of the cross. Jesus will die. God’s command to heed the words of Jesus is a command to heed the theology of the cross.

Jesus said to Peter and the other disciples and all who were gathered: “Take up your cross and follow me” (8:34). In other words: *Walk a mile in my shoes*. His first-century audience understood the meaning of the cross better than we understand it today. In 6 CE two thousand Galilean insurrectionists were crucified. Jesus was a young child at the time, so you can imagine the impression it made on him and his disciples. They would have shuddered at this teaching, because “Take up your cross” implies suffering. Discipleship is not primarily about going to church on Sundays, studying the Bible, and joining a small group – though these are all good things that contribute to our formation as disciples. Jesus teaches us that discipleship is a ministry of *suffering*. God’s kingdom demands more of us as his followers than just being kind and considerate people. God’s kingdom demands that we take up our crosses in sacrificial love. Cross-bearing is the evidence of discipleship.

What does it mean to take up our crosses? It does not mean gratuitous pain. It does not mean bearing abuse without justice. It does not mean that every bad thing that happens to us was ordained by God and therefore should be accepted without complaint. No one has the right to tell you *This is your cross to bear*. That discernment belongs between you and God alone.

But taking up our crosses does mean this: Discipleship is costly. It will cost us things. It will cost us the “bliss,” the comfort, of ignoring other people’s suffering. It will cost us the privilege of indifference toward evil and injustice. It will cost us

our expectations about how things ought to be and force us to cast down the idols of power and wealth. Discipleship will ask us to shine the light of truth into the shadowy corners of our lives where we hide from the demands of love. Loving God will cost us things. Loving our neighbors will cost us things. Loving our enemies will *absolutely* cost us things.

This costliness is what it means to deny ourselves and instead identify with the life and death of Jesus. When Jesus calls Peter's generation unfaithful (8:38) he is calling out the idolatry of the self – our desires, our demands, our expectations, our opinions. The truth of who God is will sometimes, many times contradict these things. Jesus is not just a God who heals and helps and welcomes. Jesus is a God who suffers and dies. To confess Jesus as Messiah is to confess his dying body on a cross. Discipleship means we must walk the way of the cross, too. We suffer with Jesus through acts of self-sacrificial love and compassion – the “co-suffering” that is the root meaning of compassion.

Preacher and professor Fred Craddock once wrote, “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.”³ Take up your cross and walk a mile in the shoes of your suffering neighbor.

But “if we [are] united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5). This is the good news that Peter was unable to see at first, but we rejoice because it will be our crown and glory!

Friends, God tells us to listen to Jesus. When we are finally willing to accept him for who he is, the Suffering Servant who lays down his life for the sake of others, then we can shake off the shadow of ignorance and understand who we are called to be as Christians. Then we can at last take up our crosses and follow him.

Amen.

³ Fred Craddock, cited in *Leadership* (Fall 1984) 47.