

The constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has two parts, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. The Book of Order covers many things about how we govern ourselves, including the Directory of Worship, which contains these words:

In baptism each Christian is called to ministry in Christ's name. God calls some persons from the midst of congregations to fulfill particular functions, so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish. In ordination the church sets apart with prayer and the laying on of hands those who have been called by God through the voice of the church to serve as deacons, ruling elders, and ministers of Word and Sacrament. In installation the church sets in place with prayer those who have been ordained... and are... called... to service in that ministry. (W-4.0401)

Today in worship we celebrate the ordination and installation of our new elders and deacons. The church has called particular people to particular tasks, but,

ultimately, today is more about the larger ministry of the entire church. We ordain, so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish!

Our Gospel reading from Mark today talks about the ministry of the whole people of God. Mark words it differently, addressing the question, "What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus?"

Presbyterian author and theologian, Frederick Buechner suggests "that after his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness asking himself the question of what it meant to be Jesus, and that during Lent Christians are to ask in one way or another what it means to be Christians." [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2, p. 69]

Today's text is pivotal to Mark. We have known from the very beginning of this Gospel that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who will come to save the Jewish people. They were envisioning a Savior like King David, with strength and power. But up to this point in the eighth chapter, no one in the story has recognized Jesus for who he is. And now in verse 29 (just before today's lesson), Peter finally says out loud what the rest of us have known all along, "Jesus is the Messiah." Then came this pivotal comment from Jesus, "I 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 had noted earlier that his time would come; he'd be taken away. The religious authority had already put Jesus in the same category as Satan. They'd already accused him of blasphemy, which will later condemn him to death. It did not look good for him. And now with brutal clarity and truth, Jesus spells out for the disciples his rejection, execution, and resurrection. But, judging by Peter's comment and the crowd's reaction, nobody heard anything beyond, "Jesus would be killed." "Rising after three days" didn't even seem to register with them. So up to this point in the story, Mark spoke of Jesus' power and his mission to usher in the Kingdom. Now, Jesus' focus is on transformation, the disciples' transformation, and as readers of the message, our transformation. There is a conflict between the ways of God and the ways of humans, and Jesus will not abandon this confrontation until God's ways, have not only won the day, but have also won the world. Jesus is committed to God's mission of steadfast love and saving grace, but that means for Jesus and his followers conflict would increase until its "final desperate and deadly expression." [Lectionary Homiletics, Vol XXIV, Number 2, pp. 31-32] It is natural for us to wish for a savior who would lift us out of struggle and pain, but instead, Jesus insists on marching right through the middle of pain and suffering and conflict with his message of love and has the audacity to ask us to follow him there. This is so unnatural for us to do. It is human nature to walk toward pleasure and away from pain. It was no different back then with Peter than it is for us today.

Mark tells us that upon hearing these words of a suffering Messiah, Peter took him aside. The Greek here was probably closer to Peter “took hold of” Jesus, and rebuked him. One Markan scholar reminds us that in this Gospel Jesus rebukes demons, unclean spirits and the raging wind and sea, and the disciples and crowds rebuke overeager petitioners, but it is hardly the appropriate way for a disciple to treat his teacher. [Ibid.]

Jesus’ command to Peter to, “get behind me, Satan,” is perplexing to me. I’m not sure what it means, but I’m more certain what it doesn’t mean. I don’t think Jesus is telling Peter to “get away from me” or “get out of my sight.” It seems more likely that Jesus, in front of all the disciples, rebuked Peter for his rejection of a suffering Messiah.” “Get behind me where disciples should be, following me.” “Get in line with what’s in store, not only for me, but for what’s in store for all who will follow me.” [Ibid.] In the second paragraph of today’s lesson, Jesus said to the crowd and to the disciples three things if they want to become his followers. They need to deny themselves, take up their own cross and follow Jesus. To deny oneself is to remove oneself from the center of one’s concerns, “relinquishing status and power in favor of service to others.” [Ibid. p.36] Denying oneself means we no longer belong to ourselves. If we were left to our own devices, we would try and gain the world, and probably lose our souls in the process. Jesus knows us. We will set our minds on human things rather than divine things. Then Jesus said to the crowds to pick up their cross and follow him. He could not have chosen a more vivid image for the crowds of first century Palestine. The cross meant one thing to them, death, the cruel, tortuous death that awaited anyone who dared to threaten Caesar’s kingdom. No wonder Peter grabbed him. “Jesus, you can’t mean the cross.”

It’s at the center of almost every Christian sanctuary – the cross. Each church chooses its own style or tradition of the cross, but the presence of the cross of Christ universally marks a sanctuary as a Christian worship space. As a Protestant denomination our cross is empty. Jesus is off the cross; he is risen. The empty cross reminds me of Christ’s resurrection; it points to our salvation, our redemption at the hands of Jesus Christ. I wonder though if during Lent, or especially Holy Week, we should be reminded of Jesus on the cross. It’s too easy for us to jump right over Good Friday, when we only see an empty cross. Seeing a crucifix may give us a more visceral understanding of what Jesus meant when he told the crowd, “Take up your cross and follow me.” Remember that Peter had exclaimed Jesus as the Messiah in the few verses just before our text. In the coming weeks with him, Peter and the others would learn that being the Messiah was more than healing and teaching people. It would involve betrayal, denial, suffering, death, and most mysteriously, resurrection. And taking up one’s own cross will mean taking up our own sacrificial love and service in the name of Jesus Christ.

Arguably, at the center of Mark’s Gospel is the story of what it means to be a disciple. Doing so “reminds us that the first call Jesus made to others was not to be apostles or to be ordained or even to be members in a church.” [quote from an unknown source] Jesus’ first call was for us simply to follow him, to take our own journeys of faith with the living God, just as Jesus was taking his own journey.

We ordain people to particular ministries, but their tasks are not exclusive of one another. You may notice as we ordain today, that we name deacons first, then ruling elders. This is to emphasize that the very foundation of ministry, the very foundation of taking up our cross and following Jesus, is compassion, is loving God and neighbor. Then we name elders to assure our governance is done with integrity, with decency, as well as with that foundational compassion. Deacons, elders and ministers may have unique calls and responsibilities, but we all intersect in ministries; we all share in decision-making, in compassion, in liturgical leadership. And, all of us, whether in ordered ministry or not, are called by Jesus to “deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him.” Amen.