

Under the Shadow of the Cross

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Mark 8:38-41

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Growing up Catholic Lent was always an important time to practice our faith more intentionally. I remember giving up meat on Fridays, choosing something to give up during Lent and even attending daily mass during Holy Week and fasting from Good Friday through to Easter Sunday. Growing up I understood this to be a Catholic thing, but now that I am in the protestant world, I realize that many protestants including many UCC people take on some of these practices during Lent also. In fact, most religions have similar practices of fasting or self-denial to enhance their spiritual devotion and experience. Jewish people fast before Yom Kippur which is their day of confession and repentance for past sins. Muslims have Ramadan which is a month of daily fasting from sunup till sun down. Ramadan began over the weekend. Even some of East Church people have adopted some of these practices for their own spiritual practice. I was wondering how many of you have given up something intentionally as part of your Lenten practice this spring. Or perhaps you have taken on something in addition such as intentionally doing random acts of kindness every day or taking time to journal and read scripture.

There are many benefits to such practices. It helps focus our spiritual intentions into a daily routine. It can help us have more self-control and remind us that we don't need to respond to every demand of the flesh. It can also help us be more dependent on God's help.

In the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he called Peter and others by saying simply "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." But now as we see Jesus and the disciples turn toward Jerusalem. We have a series of events that the stakes of following Jesus is

more demanding than ever. Jesus in this morning's reading increases the expectation of what it means to be a true disciple. Matthew 16 and Mark 8 again have the same sequence of events, but what differs in Mark's version in today's reading where Jesus turns to the crowd gathered outside. Jesus begins to share with the disciples that he is going to Jerusalem and will suffer and die, but in Mark's version, he then turns to the crowd nearby and addresses them along with the disciples. They are following after Jesus, perhaps waiting for the next miracle or healing.

It raises the question for the reader. Why have you come seeking to follow Jesus? Do you follow after him for what you will receive from God, a blessing, free food, some spectacle to entertain you with? Maybe you are drawn to the bantering between Jesus and the other religious leaders. What draws you to Jesus? Why are you here?

Jesus turns to the crowds and states the demands of being true disciple. Three things Jesus says. First is to deny yourself. This is a denial that puts God and others before yourself. To deny oneself is to let go of ego and to accept that your life is no longer about you, but about a much larger and greater purpose found only in Christ. In more contemporary concepts it is de-centering of self. In American culture we emphasize the individual and the rise of self, but this concept puts Christ and Christ's purposes center in our lives.

Jesus' second demand is that we take up the cross. We need to remember that the cross in first century Judea was used by Rome as a symbol of terror and torture. It was used to subjugate and torture people who opposed Rome. Anyone that threatened the control and rule of Rome over the land would be publicly hung on a cross as an example and deterrent.

Biblical scholar and Episcopal Priest, Rev. Ben "Simon" Dinglasan, Jr., wrote this in his commentary on this passage, "A fundamental aspect of the Christian life is that in small and sometimes big ways it will always include rejection and suffering. The preaching of a gospel of love that seeks to restore all people to unity with God and each other will

(must?) bring you into conflict with the powers that be who maintain control by sowing division. On a personal level, opening yourself up to love another more deeply requires that you let go of any idea of a stable and secure existence in favor of the unpredictability and profound joy of an authentic, vulnerable human relationship. When we follow Jesus, in small or large ways we will suffer, though never for the sake of suffering but always in service of God's healing and reconciling love."

Jesus also demands one final thing that sets this call to liberation apart from other forms of liberation. Jesus calls us to follow after him. This means that we watch, study and mimic the teachings and actions of Christ. We are called to walk the way of sacrificial love. A love that seeks to love and free all people, not just our own people. There are no enemies of Christ. Jesus calls us to love and pray for those who persecute us.

Nelson Mandela in his autobiography: Long Walk to Freedom. Wrote about loving and liberating his oppressors, "I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity."

That depth of love can only come when we deny ourselves, when we stop putting ourselves first, and seek the good of all people, even those we perceive as our enemies. Even if that selfless act of loving the other more than ourselves comes with rejection and suffering as Jesus endured.

Now you may be saying, "Yes I know all that and yet I know it is really hard to do." And I would agree with you. Christ puts the bar high and expects all who claim Jesus to do

likewise. We may think we have what it takes, but even the disciples struggled and failed to live up to their promises to Jesus to follow him to the cross.

What interesting to me on this concept about denying oneself is that this Greek word for denial is used only in relation to this reading and one other story. It is the story of Peter denying Christ three times after he was arrested. When Jesus predicts that Peter and all the disciples will deny Jesus, Peter swears he would never do this, and yet, just a few hours later, Peter is in the courtyard and accused of being a disciple and he denies Jesus in front of strangers. Peter grieves deeply over his own failure to stand by Jesus and claim him, in the face of his own risk and peril. Each of us can relate to this struggle to live up to the call of Christ in our lives. We all struggle with our ego and our own instinct for self-preservation. That is why we must daily be devoted to seeking Christ first in our lives.

As the church today, we can even try to preserve a way of life we once enjoyed and believed made us a great community of faith. Yet Jesus still calls us to a deeper way of being a deeper way of loving one another in Christ. We are called to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow Christ. For as much as we try to save ourselves we will lose ourselves, but if we seek Christ first we will save ourselves also.

As we continue on the path with Christ let us count the cost of discipleship knowing we cannot do this alone, but only by God's Grace will we follow Christ to the end. Just as Jesus walked toward Jerusalem feeling the weight of the cross looming ahead of him, so we too are called to follow in his footsteps counting the cost of discipleship that calls us to die to self so that we may be found alive in Christ.