

Sermon – February 28, 2021  
“Take up your cross and follow me”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Mark 8:31-38

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord Jesus, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good Morning! Welcome to the last Sunday of February. Spring cannot be far from us. We are beginning to find crocuses blooming in the flower beds. And last night as we drove down Hack’s Neck Road, we could hear frogs singing their spring songs. Did anyone find words of Jesus in their reading of a Gospel this week past that they would like to share this morning? This week my reading of the Gospels moved to Mark, and I found my attention drawn to Jesus’ words to the paralytic whose friends let him down through the roof. Jesus calls this man, son. I have read this passage many times, but I have never noticed before that Jesus uses this address for the paralytic. I have spent time listening to what Jesus might be saying to me by showing me this term a father uses for a child in Jesus’ words to the man he heals. What I think Jesus is speaking to me are words of relationship and encouragement through his address to the paralytic. This week, as I tried to listen for Jesus to speak to me in his words, I was encouraged to be drawn to this term of address for me, a son, one whom Jesus heals, one whom Jesus forgives and one whom Jesus loves.

We need to understand that we have moved backwards in scripture time from last week’s sermon, so this is not an in-time sequence of events. What has happened before this as the disciples follow Jesus is the healing of the blind man at Bethesda, a type of healing that no one had heard of occurring before Jesus came. Following that miraculous healing, Jesus has asked his disciples who they say he is and Peter has responded that Jesus is the Messiah. In response to Peter’s revelation of who he is, Jesus has told his disciples not to tell anyone he is the Messiah. We should realize that Jesus does not deny that he is God’s Messiah, but that now is not the time to share that information. Mark does not tell us how Peter understands a Messiah. However, Peter is a Jew and as such his idea of a Messiah most likely includes one who is Solomon-like with wisdom, Moses-like to provide bread in the wilderness, Joshua-like in being ready to lead

armies of Israel to victory to recover the freedom of the Promised Land, and David-like in bringing about a new kingdom where all of Israel's enemies are footstools.

Whatever the disciples' understanding of a Messiah, Jesus begins to teach the disciples what it means for one to be God's Messiah. Notice in our scripture that what Jesus teaches here is not first person, but is included in Mark's narrative. This description of a Messiah may be part of an early Christian creed or hymn and may reflect Mark's understanding of the teaching of Jesus by the early church. Look at what Jesus teaches and notice that he refers to himself as the "Son of Man." Jesus teaches that he, as God's Messiah, will experience great suffering, be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes (the religious leaders of Israel), will be killed and after three days rise again. Between what Jesus teaches and what the disciples are thinking about a Messiah is a gulf of misunderstanding that will take experiencing firsthand these events and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead them into all truth about God's Messiah. Notice that Jesus openly teaches these new ideas about God's Messiah. He is not trying to give the disciples secret knowledge, but to clearly explain what God's Messiah will be like. That understanding is open for all with ears to hear and receive. Jesus' teaching about the Messiah marks a turning point in the Gospel of Mark. From this point forward in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' path will be living out this teaching.

I am a big fan of Peter's. I like the way he says and does the things that I would want to do and say if I were in his place. I relate well with Peter. When Peter hears Jesus share that he will suffer, Peter seems to be thinking that Jesus, the master, the teacher and God in the flesh, needs some coaching on who God's Messiah is, and so he takes him aside to rebuke him and set Jesus straight. That's me, telling Jesus, "Wait a minute, this is not how this is supposed to work, I have a better way!" I wonder as I read this interaction between Peter and Jesus how close in age or relationship Jesus and Peter are that he is comfortable trying to give some advice to Jesus. Suffering and death may not be part of Peter's idea of God's Messiah, and they are also not part of my own view of how life should work. Life should be free from suffering. My thoughts are often that one who follows Jesus should now be on a suffering-free path to heaven. I can relate to Peter's words to Jesus. Can't we all?

As I read this passage, I cannot help but think that what Peter was expecting was Jesus to say something like, "Good idea, Peter. What was I thinking?" But that is not Jesus' response. Jesus will have none of Peter's view of what God's Messiah is and the way he thinks it is lived

out. Jesus turns away from the temptation that Peter's words represent. Jesus turns his back on Peter, calls him Satan, and tells him to get behind him, to follow him as a disciple follows his master. Peter's mind, like my own, is on human things and not the divine things that Jesus is focused on in his understanding of God's Messiah. Jesus understands that God's Messiah will suffer, be rejected, killed, and resurrected, so that forgiveness for all people is secured. We, like Peter, seek the human path to heaven, the road that is wide and leads to destruction. Jesus teaches that the divine path is narrow and is a path that we follow him on through suffering.

Notice that Jesus takes this moment to call the crowd and his disciples to teach what is required of those who would follow him, those who would be Jesus' disciples. Notice how different Jesus' teaching is from what the people of Israel are striving to do by keeping the Law. Jesus tells those who would follow him they must deny themselves and take up their cross. He teaches that those who seek to save their life will lose it, but that those who lose their life for Jesus or for the Gospel will save their life. He teaches them that even if they gain the whole world, if they have all things, their lives are forfeit, for there is nothing we can trade to God for our lives. All that comes into our hands is from God and is God's. How can we repay our debt if what we offer is already God's? We are in a desperate situation, for we have a great debt from our sins and we have no way, even with all of the world's riches, to repay our debt. Jesus also tells his followers that those who are ashamed of Jesus' words and of him in this life, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he returns in his Glory.

Mark does not often give us insight into Jesus' teaching, but when he does, as he has just shared, he provides details of Jesus' teaching. We could and should dwell on this teaching for a very long time and unpack what each of these statements about being a follower of Jesus means to us as those who are seeking to follow Jesus. And I think if I go really fast, I can unpack all of this teaching in about four or five hours of preaching this morning. In the few minutes we have this morning, let us focus on the idea of taking up our cross and following Jesus, and I will save the rest for another time.

The questions we are challenged with by cross bearing are "Will we take up our cross and follow Jesus?" and "What does it mean to take up our cross and follow Jesus?" These are questions that we may have struggled with most of our lives as Christians, as those who have believed that Jesus suffered, was rejected, died for our sins, and was resurrected from the dead. We believe that Jesus did this for us. We believe that God so loved the world that he gave his

only son that all who believe him might not perish but have eternal life, but Jesus tells us that the call in our lives is to follow him. What does it mean to follow Jesus? Look at the journey of the disciples so far in Mark's Gospel. They have left everything and followed Jesus on the road. They have seen him restore the sight of the blind. They have healed in his power and even driven out evil spirits in his name. But now the road ahead for God's Messiah is one of suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Peter does not expect this to be the way to follow Jesus, God's Messiah. We also may not believe that we need to follow Jesus on this road, but that is what he teaches. Jesus has rebuked Peter, not set him aside or stopped loving him because he does not yet understand the "Way of a follower." Jesus makes it plain here that God's plan is for the Messiah to suffer and die, that weakness is power. Jesus' strong reaction to Peter makes it clear that he is now headed to Jerusalem to fulfill God's plan for His Messiah. Jesus makes it plain in his teaching about the cross that all who would follow him must travel this same road. We may believe in Jesus, but will we follow him? Will we follow if it means suffering, rejection, and death? For us today in America, suffering is not a choice we consider a way of life. We have become a pain-adverse society. Yet, Jesus teaches that those who would follow him are to take up their cross. If I am to follow Jesus, then I need to find the answers to many questions. Among them are "What are the crosses we are to bear?" or "What is my cross that I am to bear?"

Let's look this morning at this idea of cross bearing. Those condemned to death on the cross carried their own cross to their execution. Jesus' teaching then is to carry that which leads to our death. This cross bearing is a call to death, death to self. This is not a call to deny oneself of something, but to deny the self, our ambitions that promote ourselves above others. God will not be a minor player in our lives. God will not be part of a multifaceted team. God demands all of us. This is our prayer in the Lord's Prayer when we say, "Not my will but thine be done." Those who make a decision to follow Jesus decide to shift the focus of their life from concern and a preoccupation with self to a reckless abandon to the will of God. This teaching that Jesus gives to the crowd and the disciples is a following of Jesus that will result in one becoming a member of a group which is despised and doomed to death, the results of carrying a cross. Carrying a cross means that we are willing to deny ourselves, even to the point of surrendering our life. This is the heart of the Gospel. To be a disciple means we are required to bear a cross. Just confessing Christ as Lord and Savior is not enough; we are to follow God's Messiah and to obey him. Following is not making some small course corrections in our lives to fit Jesus into

who we are. It is dying to who we are that we may find life in Christ. Following is not us asking Jesus to help us. Following is asking Jesus to have us, to have all of us, holding nothing back, surrendering all, and being willing to join his suffering that we might be raised with him in his resurrection.

This idea of cross bearing has always been a struggle for me. I have looked at this text and others like it where Jesus makes this statement to take up our cross and follow him and then searched for examples of what this looks like in life. How do I do this? How do followers of Christ do this? What does this mean to me, to us, in the right here and right now of seeking for each of us to be a disciple who is following Jesus? Peter also struggled with this idea, but he will get it. It will take him watching Jesus bear the cross. It will take him finding the empty tomb. It will take the guidance of the Holy Spirit to open Peter's mind to this idea of cross bearing. It will take Jesus to come to him and ask him if he "loves Jesus more than these," before Peter understands what it means, and Peter does get it. But I am not Peter. What does this mean for me? What does this mean for each of us? In my search for examples of people who have borne their cross, I have encountered Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, as you may remember, during World War II, returns from safety in the United States to confront the evil of a Nazi Germany. He returns to Germany to bear his cross, to follow Jesus, to be rejected, suffer, and die. And in his writings that come from him during his confrontation with the Nazis, he also gives us guidance for cross bearing. He once said, "When Christ calls a person, he calls him to come and die." We are not called to be great students of Jesus and to just learn all we can about this Messiah who suffers and dies. We are to be those who will follow Jesus, bearing our cross, dying to self, living with Christ. This idea of cross bearing is not a pursuit of immediate happiness. It is how we are saved from God's judgement that comes in the final day. Following Jesus may lead to humiliation in the here and now of our lives, but it is the only choice that leads us out of divine condemnation. Following Jesus is saying "no" to self, to the "I" that leads us on the enslaving and condemning path. Bearing our cross is the path of self-denial. Again, Bonhoeffer offers a solid approach to understanding self-denial. He defines it as "To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us." This is Jesus' response to Peter when he tells him "to get behind me." Jesus is telling Peter to get behind him, follow him, and keep his eyes only on Jesus and not the obstacles of the road they follow together. We also are called to follow Jesus in this

manner, by keeping close to Jesus with our eyes only on him and not on where or through what suffering the road leads.

Self-denial looks different for each of us who is seeking to follow Jesus. The idea is to daily open ourselves to God's direction and guidance. For some of us, this might mean leaving a vocation and family as these disciples have done. For those who are proud, it means turning away from seeking status and honor. For those who struggle with greed, it means setting aside one's desire for wealth. For those whose self is dominated by complacency, it means they will have to set aside their tendency for ease. Those who are fainthearted by nature will have to yield their striving for security. Those who turn to violence will have to set aside their demand for revenge. The list is long and for each of us it will be different. What we are seeking to do is to identify, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what is hindering us from giving our lives totally to God. This is where we can benefit from time in a small group or band of brothers and sisters who will lovingly look into our lives and how we are following Jesus and then speak truth to us, helping us to see our struggles and to lovingly walk with us on our journey to be those who find and bear our cross. We must each do more than survey the wondrous cross. We cannot try a cross on to see if it fits, if we like carrying it, or even if we have the strength to carry our cross. A disciple of Jesus must become like Jesus and in obedience live the cross they are to carry. As we will see with Jesus on his journey to the cross, it involves suffering. His journey teaches us that we will be subjected to shame and an unfriendly caustic worldly crowd that will face us. This is the point of separation between those who admire Jesus from afar and those who will be a disciple. A disciple will follow in obedience down any path that their master leads, even the path that leads to martyrdom, to death. A disciple is one who follows Jesus, who goes with him all the way. A disciple is one who will seek to identify their cross and when they find it, does not shy from it but willingly takes it up and follows Jesus. As Jim Elliott said, "He is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." Will we be disciples of Jesus? Then we must find and then take up our cross and follow him.

*Pray with me: Abba, Father, we confess that we have not denied the self and taken up our cross and followed Jesus. Father, we look at the road and see the suffering and death it leads to and shrink back from following Jesus. Holy Spirit, come. Lord Jesus come, and guide us, fill us that we may find our cross, take it up, and with our eyes only on you, bear it as we follow you. Amen.*