

Discipleship: The Ups and Downs of Cross Carrying.

Mark 8:27-9:8

INTRODUCTION

So the last time I tried to preach this sermon on discipleship was at Patty's farewell, before I was so rudely interrupted. Hopefully today I can get through this sermon. In continuing with our Gospel of Mark sermon series, we are looking at the theme of discipleship for a second time, since it is a recurring theme in Mark's gospel. Exploring examples of what a life of discipleship might look like is beneficial for all of us. So that we know what we are getting into, and also to know that we are not the first people to struggle on this journey.

Because discipleship, particularly the discipleship that Jesus discusses is difficult. The discipleship Jesus discusses involves very real sacrifices. In theory and in story, it is admirable and maybe even romanticized. In practice however, what Jesus is talking about is difficult and unappealing. Jesus' discussion about sacrifices is hard to practice. We love to hear stories and watch movies where people make big sacrifices, but in our own lives, it isn't as enticing.

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Dirk Willems

One of the most famous Anabaptist martyrs, and someone whose story fascinates me is Dirk Willems. You probably all know his story but it is worth repeating. Dirk Willems was arrested for his Anabaptist beliefs and activities. He managed to escape imprisonment and flee across a frozen pond. A guard chased him across the ice but fell through and screamed for help. Dirk went back and rescued his enemy. He was recaptured and still executed despite this action of bravery and compassion. I have always found his story to be not only inspiring, but also a great representation of the radical compassion Christ calls us to. When I think about putting myself in Dirk's shoes however, I don't feel like I could ever do that.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer

I am currently reading more about Dietrich Bonhoeffer in my spare time, because he is an important figure in the history of the church, even though he is part of the Lutheran tradition instead of the Anabaptist tradition. Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich. He was outspoken against Nazism, and the attempts from Nazi officials to put members of their party in roles of power within the church. He later became involved in the plots to kill Hitler, and used his church contacts across the continent to inform people of the resistance happening within Germany. He risked his life by being involved in such a network, and he also risked his conscience. He believed killing was wrong and that he would have to rely on God's grace for his salvation after being involved in the plot. Bonhoeffer was eventually arrested and killed near the end of the war. Again, I find myself admiring Bonhoeffer and his sacrifices for the sake of discipleship, but I really struggle to understand what they mean for my life.

Making these sacrifices is difficult. It does not create an easy life, but one full of ups and downs, highlights and lowlights. When we consider discipleship, we are embarking on a journey many before us have. Discipleship was a key theme for early Anabaptists and is still central to our faith tradition today. It was one of the most important points of separation from both the Catholic and Reformed traditions. They wanted to explore what happened after accepting the grace of God. How to live and exist in the world, and to do so, they believed in exploring how the early church, and therefore Jesus' disciples lived. This brings us to our text today. We still today can look to the very first disciples to try and understand what discipleship means, and also what comes with this kind of journey.

When I was in college, these verses fell into a memorizing project I was working on, and I was really struck by the rollercoaster that Peter gets sent through. He makes a profound realization that Jesus is the Messiah. Shortly after when Jesus explains that being the Messiah means that he will suffer and die, Peter rebukes the man he has just said is the Messiah, at which point Peter is called a Satan (which is the title of accuser or

opposition not a red guy with horns). Then six days later, Peter is a witness to the transfiguration, where Jesus' glory is shown, and he sees Jesus alongside two pillars of his faith. So, we will take deeper look at this section by section in our scripture, while keeping in mind the topsy turvy life that awaits a disciple of Jesus.

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THE TEXT

Peter's Profound Pronouncement

Our section of scripture begins with Jesus asking a question. Who do people say that I am? The disciples give multiple answers, as there are a lot of theories about who Jesus is flying around. And then Peter gives what appears to be the correct answer. He says that Jesus is the Messiah, which could mean a lot of things, but in context, refers to a specific idea. **SLIDE** Timothy Geddert says the word Messiah here identifies Jesus as "the expected Coming One, the heir to David's throne, the one who establishes God's kingdom" (Geddert, 201). Furthermore, the use of the word Messiah "captures the focus on Jewish expectation" (Geddert, 201). Essentially Peter seems to get the answer right. Peter has seen enough and heard enough to believe in something far bigger than himself, and his worldview. That the man in front of him is going to bring reconciliation into the world. Peter is perhaps taking an early step that all do when it comes to discipleship- choosing to hope that change can happen. Rachel Held Evans has a very popular quote that I think paints a realistic picture of what this choice to believe looks like. She famously said **SLIDE** "The story of Jesus, is the story I am willing to risk being wrong about". I love that quote, because that language of choosing to venture into uncertainty connects with me a lot more than language like conversion, or having no doubts. Mark seems to confirm that becoming a disciple of Jesus is a journey. There doesn't seem to be a moment where the disciples "get it" and never look back. They have moments of clarity and moments of doubt. Moments of bravery, and moments where the fear wins. Here Peter has a moment of clarity- Jesus is more than a messenger, Jesus is a saviour.

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Jesus Predicts, Rebukes and Instructs

As the text goes on, we see that Peter has not in fact reached a higher level of understanding, where everything makes sense all of the time. That isn't how life works. Jesus begins talking about what is awaiting him. He tells them that suffering, accusations and death are coming up on the agenda of his life. Peter is outraged, and takes Jesus, the Messiah, aside and begins to rebuke him. Jesus then rebukes Peter rather drastically calling him Satan. Peter in this moment is more of an accuser and a tempter, than a disciple of Jesus. It is clear that Peter's previous pronouncement does not mean he understands everything. He cannot comprehend how the Messiah, can be someone who is killed. He has some understanding but not a full understanding of what he has proclaimed. This is a common theme throughout the book of Mark. Some scholars including Timothy Geddert note the placement of Jesus healing the Blind Man in two phases right before this exchange between Peter and Jesus. That man sees partially when he is healed by Jesus, and is touched again before he sees fully. (Geddert 202). Peter is experiencing something similar. He can see that Jesus is the Messiah, but he is still blind to what that truly means. Ched Myers highlights the way that Peter and Jesus have different understandings of what "Messiah" means. **SLIDE**

"According to the understanding of Peter, 'Messiah' necessarily means royal triumph and the restoration of honour. Against this, Jesus argues that 'Human One [Son of Man] necessarily means suffering" (Myers, 244).

Peter seems to have fantasies of power when it comes to the Messiah, while Jesus makes Peter aware that suffering is a "political inevitability" when standing up against injustice (Meyers 244).

Following Jesus and Peter's disagreement Jesus preaches to his larger crowd of followers about "taking up their cross". This is perhaps the most troubling and difficult teaching of Jesus. While we may be able to understand what "take up your cross" meant for Jesus' original audience,

understanding it in our lives today is another matter. Deny yourself and take up your cross can have many meanings. Timothy Geddert lists out just a few of them. **SLIDE**

“Cross carrying is loaded with a wealth of associations, especially for later Christian readers who know the outcome of the story and understand a NT theology of the cross. From this perspective cross-carrying may well allude to such diverse elements as a willingness to suffer (even martyrdom), crucifixion of the flesh (Gal. 5:24), the acceptance of and proclamation of the gospel, a commitment to non retaliation, peacemaking and reconciliation, freedom from the law, and so on” (Geddert, 206).

How we apply what Jesus asks of disciples here is very difficult, and very important. Ched Myers in his political perspective on Jesus, believes that those listening to Jesus, would have understood clearly what he meant. That to follow Jesus, was to put one’s life at risk. **SLIDE**

“The threat to punish by death is the bottom line of the power of the state; fear of this threat keeps the dominant order intact. By resisting this fear and pursuing kingdom practice even at the cost of death, the disciple contributes to shattering the powers’ reign of death in history” (Myers, 247).

I feel incredibly far removed from this understanding of cross carrying. I know however, that plenty of disciples throughout history have chosen to live this out. Dirk Willems and Dietrich Bonhoeffer both put aside their fear to pursue kingdom practice, and it cost them their lives.

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The Transfiguration

The final twist in this up and down discipleship narrative is the transfiguration which I believe Henry will preach on in a few weeks. For the disciples, particularly Peter following Jesus means experiencing some incredible low points, and some staggering high points. After thinking he had it right, and then being rebuked for having it wrong, Peter is one of the

three disciples selected to witness Jesus in his full glory. What a bumpy road.

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Application

So how can we apply this text to our lives? The first thing we can remember is that discipleship is a nuanced, bumpy journey. We often idealize a life where one day it all comes together. Where one day we know we have made it. That isn't really how life works. When we choose to follow Jesus, our faith and understanding is more nuanced than concrete. It might ebb and flow, we might find ourselves back at square one from time to time. The point is that we try our best to follow Jesus. Sometimes when the bumps and difficult times come, we will run away, like the disciples when Jesus was arrested. Sometimes we will find ourselves witnessing something special, like Peter, James and John on that mountain. Sometimes we will be able to stand firm in our hope that following Jesus can have a powerful impact on our world. **SLIDE**

Second, discipleship clearly involves some level of sacrifice. I struggle to understand what this means to me. I sometimes wonder if I am where I am supposed to be. Or should I be putting myself out there more, going into situations where doing what is right might involve some real sacrifices. I also know that I want to be careful to not develop a Christian victim complex. I don't want to be so desperate to experience persecution that I start finding ways of telling myself that I am persecuted. Because I am not. I look up to the martyrs of the past. I think that people like the Apostle Peter, Dirk Willems and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are remarkable people for the way they stood up for good in the face of evil. But the reality is, no one is chasing me across Big Shell Lake while I am ice fishing so they can arrest me for my beliefs. There isn't a fascist political party trying to take over Mennonite Church Saskatchewan. I live in a nice house, in a nice little town. Despite all this confusion, I know that standing up against injustice can be costly, and that Jesus calls his disciples to do that. **SLIDE**

Finally, we can be inspired by other disciples. Not just the disciples that get history books written about them, or disciples that die for the faith. Discipleship stories are important and useful as we embark on this journey of discipleship. A journey that will undoubtedly have highs and lows. Leaps forwards, and retreats backwards. May God grant us the strength to follow Jesus, when things are difficult, when we are scared, and when we have something to lose. In the darkest times may we remember the mountaintop experiences, and those who have walked before us. Amen.

Works Cited

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