

**NOT OPTIONAL EQUIPMENT; MARK 8:31-38; MARCH 8, 2009 – LENT TWO  
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The unsettling clash between Jesus and Peter in today's story is a clash, initially, of titles for Jesus. You see Peter has just responded to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" with the unhesitating reply, "You are the Messiah."

For Peter this term implied Jesus' new era of leadership and authority; a military hero status for whom suffering was unthinkable.

But when it comes to talking about his own suffering and death Jesus chooses the term "Son of Man" – like a president referring to himself as "head of state" rather than "commander in chief." And here is the evolution of Christianity before our very eyes. Until now the title Son of Man referred to the divine authority in teaching and judgment of God's chosen one. But the idea that the Son of Man would also suffer is completely new.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of this moment in Jesus' ministry. It is a watershed event not just in Mark, or in Christianity, or even in the great faith traditions, but in all of recorded history.

It is the pearl of great price, the hidden treasure, the key that unlocks the mystery of Jesus' life-giving presence not only during his lifetime but after his death and resurrection in ways that transform people, relationships and communities.

Maybe watershed isn't a bad designation. Jesus' announcement today (and two more times in the next chapter of Mark) that he will undergo suffering and death at the hands of chief priests and doctors of the law diverted the holy blessing and wonder of life from the broken cisterns of the religious authorities into the parched desert of the lives of the people.

Religion and the practice of the faith in the first century had been honed into a highly perfected spiritual etiquette and table manners.

Qualifications and rankings for such expertise were limited to a rarified cadre of religious leaders practiced in the art of textual criticism and interpretation. The resulting disconnection between the life of the people and the eternal springs of their faith perpetuated a spiritual drought that engulfed the nation.

Then this itinerant rabbi appears along the dusty roads of Galilee. He attracts followers and crowds and turns his face at last to the holy city where the religious and political powers had negotiated a careful but teetering truce.

In today's story, after disagreeing over the meaning of his titles, Peter's rebuke of Jesus is met by Jesus' rebuke of Peter. The term in both instances is "epitimaō" in the Greek used for the silencing of demons. Peter seems to have fallen into the same trap as Jesus' relatives who think that he is insane and needs to be exorcised.

Jesus' swift response to Peter was appropriate from a master whose disciple had crossed the cultural line of respect and humility between teacher and student.

Then Jesus turned to his followers and the multitude, for a crowd had gathered Mark says, and called them to take up their crosses as well.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

In that short speech the secret to overturning the powers of darkness was proclaimed. Yet, they are such familiar words I fear we let them glide over our hearts and minds without allowing them to seep into the ground of our being.

Indeed, when Peter heard those words they were so new and startling he could not contain himself which is the net equivalent of our hearing those words and being totally contained.

In our defense, it is not easy in a ‘pain-killer’ culture – pre-occupied with personal safety and well-being, covering all conceivable bases of exposure with insurance for everything from our teeth to our cars and homes to long-term health care and burial expenses – it is not easy in this safety-obsessed society to understand much less live what Jesus is talking about today.

And in Peter’s defense the notion that God’s appointed, anointed savior would be regarded with anything less than universal homage to say nothing of physical harm was absent from any previous understanding of who the savior would be.

So Peter and we have our work cut out for us if we’re to follow Jesus in any way that recognizably models our lives after his.

And here is a vital distinction: picking up our cross, as Jesus does, is not something we do because we are human beings – dealing with a health problem, an annoying relative, or a bad boss. Our faith offers other resources for facing those challenges.

Picking up our cross in the way Jesus talks about is what results from our following him. He challenges us to think like God, not like the world.

Jesus’ healing ministry makes it clear that God does not delight in human suffering. Yet, to conclude that suffering and self-sacrifice are always undesirable endangers our faith. Striking a balance between the alleviation of human suffering on the one hand and embracing our own suffering for Jesus’ sake and the gospel’s on the other is the tension that holds the church together and allows it to speak to the world.

So what does it mean to pick up our cross and follow him? In what way does our own suffering make sense?

One preacher says for most Christians picking up our cross is not usually a matter of life and death. 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 and, yes, if we’re brave and lucky and start to get the hang of it a \$5 bill here, a \$10 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.”

What do such acts look like, that incur our own suffering and death?

One colleague tells about a member of his congregation who noticed then gently probed and finally challenged promotional practices in his company that were based on racial identity. The man was fired and took a year to find a job because of this boss' poor opinion of him.

This very congregation challenged our denomination's prohibition to the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the church. That was back in the early 1980s. Several churches of the presbytery filed formal complaints that we had violated the constitution. The court case went all the way to the national judicial commission. Some members left the church in disagreement over our Session's stand on this issue.

Whether it's something that dramatic or merely challenging with the right words an old stereotype or prejudice in the locker room or at the office water cooler, Jesus says when we give up our lives in this way we get them back again.

Not, of course, according to the world's standards for success or popularity but according to God's abundant life for the human family.

Of course, Jesus also says today that if we seek to avoid such controversy or cross-bearing moments we lose our lives. God's *raison d'être* seeps out of us so that we're living only for ourselves which after a while turns into little more than a shell of an existence. There's nothing in that case, Jesus says, that we can offer to get our lives back again.

At the end of his little talk today, you'd expect Mark to say, "After this teaching, most of his disciples left him, muttering to themselves, 'I had no idea that's the direction he was going. I'm out of here.'"

But if any of them left, Mark doesn't say so. Rather they keep walking with Jesus, even though he's been more explicit than a drug commercial about the danger and difficulty of his way.

It's rather amazing, when you consider how disappointing the disciples are in the Gospel of Mark, that Jesus would enlist people like that to undertake such an important challenging mission. But he does. And they do. So the good news Mark cleverly conveys this morning is that you and I, in all likelihood, are able to bear our crosses as well.

All those years ago when Jesus redefined what faith is and does it was a watershed moment; he diverted the living waters of God's life from empty rituals into the spiritually starving and thirsty lives of the people.

Isaiah foresaw the coming of such a day when he said, "Let the wilderness and the thirsty land be glad, let the desert rejoice and burst into flower; Let it flower with fields of asphodel, let it rejoice and shout for joy...for water springs up in the wilderness, and torrents flow in dry land.

The mirage becomes a pool, the thirsty land bubbling springs; instead of reeds and rushes, grasses shall grow...and there shall be a causeway there called the Way of Holiness...and those he has ransomed shall return by it and the Lord's redeemed shall come home.

No matter how clever we are and adept at asset protection and physical safety there will be moments when we are called to journey the Way of Holiness, called to suffer and sacrifice some part or all of ourselves for Jesus and the gospel.

Perhaps Karl Marx was right when he said religion is an opiate if we use it to avoid struggle and remove the trials from our lives. But Mark tells us today we ignore the word of the cross at our own peril.

I suspect those stumbling and immature followers of Jesus became men and women of faith in those first days after Easter when they started taking up their crosses just as they had seen him take up his. That's when the church became and becomes a force to be reckoned with, a force for justice – when people like you and me take up our cross and follow him. Amen.