

Losing Your Life

Mark 8:31-38

February 25, 2018

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Maybe you've heard the story of the husband reconciling the credit card bill who said to his wife, "Ruth, you promised me you wouldn't buy another new dress."

She replied, "Honey, the devil tempted me."

"Well, you should have said: 'Get behind me Satan.'"

"I did, and then he whispered over my shoulder, 'Wow, it fits you beautifully in the back too.'"

Jesus called the disciples to follow him but when Peter tries to discourage him from traveling the road to the cross, he says, "Get behind me Satan!" Strong words. Peter has just confessed finally who Jesus really is. In response to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responds, "You are the Messiah!" And they are all warned not to tell anyone about him. It's the turning point in this Gospel. This is the apex, the high point. The disciples are finally beginning to understand who he is, but then immediately they prove how little they really understand. And the rest of the story is one of their faithlessness, and denial, and abandonment. They were hoping for an easier redemption. They were hoping for a less demanding faith. They were hoping that they would be spared the depths of anguish and the difficulty of courage, and the risks that come with putting their lives on the line for what they believed. The cross now casts its shadow over the little band of disciples, and over our lives, and over all of history.

For three years Jesus lived and ministered in Galilee. Now faith demanded that he go to Jerusalem. For three years he tried to keep his true identity hidden and his ministry quiet to avoid confrontation. Now he was going before the very seats of power to challenge the way things were. For years he enjoyed days by the Sea of Galilee, talking to great crowds and teaching them. But now the star-studded nights in the small villages were over. Waking early to withdraw alone for prayer and solitude was a distant memory. Long walks between towns with his disciples, interspersed with acts of kindness, healing,

and teaching were now finished. This is the turning point of the story. The Galilee days are over. To fulfill his mission and calling and to finish the work he came to accomplish, Jesus must leave Galilee behind and enter Jerusalem.

We like to omit the Jerusalem part of our faith! We prefer Galilee, where the crowds are always responsive and the ministry is successful and there is an abundance of resources. We forget – or want to forget – that the ministry of Jesus included Jerusalem, where the crowds are unpredictable and unreliable, where there is loneliness, and betrayal, and cruelty lurking around the corner. The ministry of Jesus included both Galilee and Jerusalem; both included times of success and times of betrayal and denial; times of ease and times of great strain. Crowds that “cheer” on one day are the same crowds that “jeer” at him later. We have come to expect only the prosperity of our faith — never suffering or challenge or difficult choices. We have developed a Galilee kind of religion which, however valuable it may be, is only half of the Christian faith.

This week we remember the other half of that faith, the difficult and demanding and even painful reality that those who serve the living God inevitably face. The way of the cross is no easy journey home. There are sacrifices to make and sufferings to willingly endure as our own, on behalf of others. Until the day comes when Jesus Christ triumphantly enters his reign in glory, there are injustices for us to confront, and evils that we must stare down, and risks for us to take as we follow this Lord and King – the crucified one! Like the disciples, there will be times when we too will want to run from Jerusalem back to a religion of Galilee, where it is safe. But Jesus leads us onward to challenge the way things are for the sake of the way things should and can be, even at personal cost and sacrifice.

Everyone who has taken marriage vows or tried to raise a child knows that it is in giving that we receive. There is a paradox in life — when we try to save our lives we lose them, but when we lose our lives and make others more important than we are to ourselves, we find life and fulfillment. It is in our families that we are most likely to discover this reality, this paradox. The way to life is the way of service rather than selfishness. We never get the kids we wanted. We learn to love the ones we have and are committed to, despite the sacrifices and challenges that come with keeping those promises. I know in life I will always have breakdowns and brokenness, but I also will have breakthroughs. Every

marriage and every parent knows what it is to experience breakdowns, but perseverance often also brings breakthroughs. Here in this encounter between Jesus and Peter, we get a glimpse that brokenness may be a necessary prelude to a breakthrough.

Once again we have experienced another school shooting, this time in Parkland, Florida. Students are mobilizing to change laws that would prevent another occurrence like it. We see how devastated children and families are following Sandy Hook, Las Vegas, and Columbine. Is there enough momentum this time to actually bring lasting change? We shall see. But clearly what is needed is not a Galilee kind of faith, but a Jerusalem kind of faith, that goes all the way to the depths of our suffering and the terror of our evil. A faith that skips over the real challenges of life is no help when the experience is devastating.

Like others his age in Germany at the end of World War II, broken and shattered, after recovery from injuries and survival in camps, Jurgen Moltmann returned as a student to the classroom. "A theology which did not speak of God in the sight of the one who was abandoned and crucified would have had nothing to say to us then," he writes in the forward to his book *The Crucified God*. "Whether or not Christianity, in an alienated, divided and oppressive society, itself becomes alienated, divided, and an accomplice of oppression, is ultimately decided only by whether the crucified Christ is a stranger to it, or the Lord who determines the form of its existence."¹ In other words, we follow and serve a Lord who calls us to take up our cross and follow him. We are called to lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel in order to find them. We are invited to make the journey to Jerusalem with our crucified God and to pick up the pieces and rebuild an alienated, divided, and oppressive society.

An invitation to a fuller and deeper Christian faith and commitment awaits us all. We may prefer to avoid the road to Easter and would rather just arrive at the destination without any struggle or travail. We may want a God who leads us only to easy victories and to mountain top experiences! We didn't bargain for one who takes us through the valleys of this life and into the storms, and certainly not to the very precipice of darkness and death. To follow this Lord we must trust God in the midst of trials and tribulations and the struggle to right the wrongs of the world. We prefer Easter resurrections without

1 Moltmann, Jurgen, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974) p. 3

Good Friday crucifixions! But that is not the Gospel of Christ. It is through the pain and suffering of the world (not above it or around it) that the reign and rule of this King is established.

With a calm certainty that God has things in hand, despite evidence to the contrary, Jesus faced the gathering storm with and in faith. Wherever it is, in Galilee or Jerusalem; however it is, smooth or rough, laughter or tears; when we're feeling close to God, prayerful or when we are distant and uninspired – wherever, however, whenever – we follow this Lord. And never forget that when we make that decision in this difficult and threatening world, to follow this Lord. The very power and forces of heaven are at our back! Let me conclude with a poem that captures the sense of challenge that we as a church face.

Through the Night of Dark and Sorrow

*Through the night of doubt and sorrow,
onward goes the pilgrim band,
singing songs of expectation,
marching to the promised land.
Clear before us through the darkness
gleams and burns the guiding light;
pilgrim clasps the hand of pilgrim
stepping fearless through the night.*

*Onward, therefore, sisters, brothers;
onward, with the cross our aid.
Bear its shame, and fight its battle
till we rest beneath its shade.
Soon shall come the great awak'ning;
soon the rending of the tomb!
Then the scatt'ring of all shadows,
and the end of toil and gloom.*

Thanks be to God! Amen.

