

“Taking Up Our Crosses”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Who do people say that I am? I mean “Lisa Crismore”. For most of you in the congregation, you would probably call me “one of your pastors” or “our assistant pastor.” My children would answer this differently as well as my husband. I am sure they would say I am their mother or their wife. People in my neighborhood would say I am the woman who walks the white dog with black spots and pointy ears.

Who would people say that you are? Would they also refer to you by your connections to other people? Would they refer to your profession? Would they call you friend? Would they say you are a disciple of Jesus Christ? I am taking a class online for Ministry in Transition, which I believe that is what we are in with the pandemic. One of our professors on the first day introduced herself as “a child of God.” Who would people say that you are?

In the Gospel of Mark today, Jesus is asking his disciples, “who do people say that I am?” It is interesting that he has this conversation with them because if we back up a bit in the scriptures we will hear that Jesus has just fed a huge crowd with a few loaves of bread and some fish. He has also healed a blind man. It is clear that his disciples have witnessed Jesus’ power. They have seen him perform miracles.

The disciples respond to this question by saying, “some say you are John the Baptist, some say Elijah and some others say a prophet.” Then Jesus asks them, “Who do you say that I am? It is bold Peter, who steps up and says, “You are the Messiah.”

Ding-Ding-Ding, Peter gets it right! Or does he? Jesus begins to teach them by explaining to them what is going to happen to him. *He calls himself the Son of Man, which is a reference found in the book of Daniel. It refers to a heavenly figure who is given dominion and kingship over all peoples. (Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 2, Jouette M. Bassler; Westminster John Knox Press; 2008; p. 69).* He will have to go through great suffering and be rejected by the religious leaders of the church. He will be killed and then on the third day, he will rise from the grave.

It is clear that Peter doesn't like what he is hearing. He pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him! Peter is saying, "Wait a minute, Jesus! The Messiah is supposed to come and stand up to the Roman government. He is supposed to use his power and might to overthrow the government officials and seek justice for the oppressed. The Messiah was to come and right the wrongs!"

We can relate to Peter's reaction. Do you recall last week when Ann Hamel during her sermon had us imagine going back in time to this period in history? The Roman government was not very nice. People suffered and lived in great fear. It is no wonder that Peter has a difficult time realizing the reality of Jesus' defining moment of who the Messiah is and what he will endure.

Jesus makes it clear by turning back to Peter and rebuking him in return. Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." In the Message it says, "You do not understand how God works!"

How many times do we do this in our lives? We think we know exactly who God is and how God will act. We know how God should answer our prayers. We know what our faith journeys should look like. Then, when it doesn't turn out this way, it is so difficult for us to comprehend. Our hearts are set on human things and rarely ever on the divine. It is hard to understand how God works.

Peter learns that the divine Messiah has come to save all of human kind not just those who are there in that place in time. Jesus, the divine Messiah, breaks down the step-by-step course in what it will take to follow him. If we want to follow Jesus, we must deny ourselves and take up our crosses.

The cross, which we wear as jewelry, hang on our walls as décor, or have painted on our t-shirts, reminds us of the sacrificial death of Christ so that our sins are forgiven. We give thanks for Christ's death, showing us the unconditional love that God had for us. It is no doubt that the cross is a sacred symbol of our faith. Jesus gave up the power, influence and control that a crown would give him and exchanged it for a cross.

We all seek to follow Jesus as his faithful disciples, right? What does it mean for us to deny ourselves and take up our crosses? Jill Duffield speaks about this as being the trinity of discipleship. It is denying oneself, taking up our cross and following Jesus. It is like a three-legged stool, which can't stand up if one of the legs are missing. It is essential to have all three legs to succeed as Jesus' disciple. (Lent in Plain Sight; Jill Duffield; 2020; Westminster John Knox Press; p. 44)

It begins with self-denial. Jesus comes as a selfless servant willing to die for all of us. We know we are not Jesus. But, we must seek to live our lives like the one who came to earth to serve not to be served. We must look to Jesus to show us how to serve others. We must open our eyes and not focus on our needs but the needs of others. We must strive to love others unconditionally like Christ. If we don't, there is no way we can live a life of discipleship.

The other leg is taking up your cross. Earlier I asked you, who do people say you are? In those descriptions: mother, friend, spouse, pastor, teacher, grandparent, disciple, church member, how do you influence those people? People look to you for your gifts. They trust you. They respect you. You may or may not have power over people but in whatever circle you are in you have influence. How do you use that influence? Is it for the good of others or for selfish needs and wants?

When we think of the cross, we think about sacrifice and death. Karoline Lewis invites us to also think about the cross as a commitment from Jesus to have a relationship with us. When we carry our own crosses, we are committing to a faithful relationship with Jesus Christ.

The third leg is following Jesus. I love how the Message sums it up best. It reads, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; / am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self."

We find ourselves marking the first Sunday in Lent. Ann reminded us last week that we find ourselves close to one year into the pandemic! One Year! We are so grateful to see the Covid numbers slowly creep down as more and more people are vaccinated. And yet, we are far from this thing being over. I have heard people say they are Covid tired. They are Covid weary.

So, how do we begin our Lenten journey with energy, intelligence, imagination and love seeking to be Christ's faithful followers, denying ourselves and taking up our crosses? I thought it would be good to do a time of reflection and meditation. It may be challenging to have silence. So, I promise it will not be too long.

Please close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Breathe in and out. Breathe in and out. Go to a place that brings you joy and comfort. Remind yourself that you are in the presence of God. I invite you to place your palms in your lap and open them up as though you are wanting to receive the goodness of Christ.

- Who are you? Who do people say you are? What is your identity? How does it feel to think about being a disciple of Christ?
- Think about your relationships to others. Who do you influence? How do you use your influence on others?
- What does it mean for you to deny yourself? When did you deny yourself to be able to live out your faith in Christ? You went against what the world thought you should do and did what Christ wanted you to do.
- What does it mean for you to carry your own cross? What does this symbol mean to you?
- Where is Jesus asking you to follow? Is it hard to give up control and follow him? Do you trust where you are going even if it challenges your comfort and security?

Let us pray:

O God of our 40-day journey, you call us to give up self so that we will commit to traveling the path that you guide us to take. Grant us strength as we seek the trinity of discipleship. When the road of sacrifice and servanthood gets overwhelming, give us rest and Sabbath renewal so that the weight of the cross will not be too much to bear. We are grateful for this time of reflection and examination, which opens our ears to hear you more clearly. Give us bold faith as we make our way to Jerusalem and prepare our hearts to receive your risen Son. In Jesus name, Amen.