

Grace and peace be yours from God our Sovereign, and from our Lord and savior, Jesus the Christ, and from the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's sermon is about the difficulty of discipleship, of following truly the way of Jesus. I begin with the premise that all of us desire to be faithful to our call to follow, yet all of us continue to falter and stumble and have made numerous concessions to accommodate the world.

Over the last 20 years or so there has been a virtual revolution in Biblical studies. The emphasis has shifted dramatically from form criticism, to reading the Gospel as story.

Marks Gospel might be called the Gospel of **"The Way"**. Before the curtain rises on the first act of the story, we hear a voice from offstage, reading from the Hebrew scriptures. ***"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord"***

This is a combination of two passages, one from Exodus and one from Malachi. The first is the heralding of a way for the Hebrew people in its journey toward liberation:

*Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you **on the way**, and bring you to the land I have prepared for you. Ex. 23:20,*

The second "the Way" is identified with the way being cleared for Yahweh's return as announced by the prophet "Malachi".

*"Behold I dispatch my messenger **to make a way before me**" Mal 3:1a*

Both of these ancient texts function to introduce **"the way"** as the central discipleship motif in the gospel. John prepares the way, Jesus lives it. The Disciples are called to follow Jesus on it. Hence early Christians were known as "People of the Way".

For the first half of the Gospel, Jesus goes about showing how **his way** is different from **the way of the world**. While the world's way divides and builds walls of separation, Jesus' way unites and builds bridges of inclusion.

The drama of the opening half of the Gospel builds as the once eager disciples begin to hesitate and have serious doubts about Jesus' way. They are overcome with fear and trepidation and begin to gradually move away from Jesus. Indeed the section closes with Jesus making this harsh assessment of the disciples understanding.

*Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?
Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear, and do you
not remember?*

With that ringing indictment of the disciples increasing blindness, the second half of the Gospel opens on a note of hope. It entails a strange story of healing a blind man. The first healing doesn't take effect in one try. After Jesus first attempt to heal him the man sees, but only dimly. Humans appear to be like trees walking around. It is only after a second attempt that the healing takes full effect. This story stands as both a word of warning about the difficulty of truly seeing and following Jesus on the way, but also as a word of hope, that Jesus' persistence will bear fruit, blindness can be overcome, and sight, true sight, can be achieved.

What follows in the Gospel is the story of Jesus "on the Way" to Jerusalem, and the cross. It has become known as the "Catechism of the Way". During the journey, Mark shares 3 portents of death and resurrection. Each portent occurs "**On the way**"; each is accompanied by some **failure by the disciples to see or comprehend**; each **entails a teaching resulting in a paradox**. All underscore the difficulty of discipleship!

The first portent involves the question of who is Jesus and what does it mean to be messiah. The story is about Peter attempting to dissuade Jesus from following the way. It ends with Jesus calling Peter, "Satan" and telling him his heart is set on earthly things, and not on God's.

This results in Jesus second call to discipleship. But now the call is not simply to "follow" now it is "**pick up your cross** and follow". It ends with this teaching paradox:

*Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, whoever loses their life for the
sake of the Gospel will save it.*

The second portent involves the Gospel text for today. Again Jesus speaks of being betrayed, executed, and raised from the dead. Again the disciples fail to understand or embrace Jesus message.

So Jesus asks them "What were you discussing "**on the way**"? And the text says "But they were silent for **on the way** they had argued with one another who was the greatest." This results in Jesus second teaching paradox.

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.

The third portent involves James and John seeking greatness. It also occurs on the way and now their destination is revealed as Jerusalem. Metaphorically “the way” leads into the place of power, into the very heart of darkness, where greatness will be measured in opposition to the powers and principalities. And so Jesus response to James and John is:

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant.”

Jesus’ teaching is that what the disciples need to hear, understand, and appropriate into their life, is that to be a leader, to achieve greatness, to be first, is to become last and servant of all.

To underscore his teaching, Jesus takes a little child and places it in their midst and tells *them* “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

It is important that we do not read into this text our modern world view of children. A better world view, one closer to the world of Jesus, would be the world of children in Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist. Unwashed, unwanted, unvalued. In other words “one of the least of these....” Of Matthew’s Gospel.

If whoever welcome them welcomes God.

All the disciples, including the inner core of Peter James and John, continue to falter along the way. They fail to discern the difference between the alternatives of the way of the world and the way of God. And it will get worse. After Peter’s denial of Jesus the disciples will all have fled and abandon Jesus at the cross. We will not hear from them again for the remainder of the Gospel.

Think about it. Why would Mark spend half of his Gospel story of Jesus telling us of the failure of the disciples. I suggest that Mark’s narrative underscores the difficulty of discipleship so that as we enter the story, we need to be aware of our own hardness of heart, our own blindness, our own fear, and our own reluctance to follow “the way of the cross.”

We need to be aware of how difficult it is within our culture to discern the difference between the values of the kingdom of this world and the values of the kingdom of God. We need to see how easy it is to delude ourselves into believing that we are following Jesus while embracing this world’s definition of greatness. Someone put it this way.... If you were on trail for being a Christian, a follower of the way of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

But one must read the whole Gospel story, less we give in to despair. While the discipleship journey is hard and difficult, it is not impossible. For with God, all things are possible.

That is why in the first half of the Gospel Mark tells the parable of the sower of the seed. In that parable we are told that 80 % of what we do in scattering the seed will be unproductive. But not to worry, because all that God needs is for that one seed, to fall on fertile ground and God will bring forth a harvest that exceeds all expectations!

Not to worry, that even though we may be blind and deaf, Jesus unstops the ears of the deaf and opens the eyes of the blind.

Not to worry, that even though we stumble along “the way” all is not lost. God is not done with us yet..... just as Jesus was not done with the blind man who saw people looking like trees God still has more to give.

Not to worry, even though we are called to pick up our cross and follow Jesus, and we abandon both the cross and Jesus, God is not done with us yet.

Not to worry, that even though through our actions we might totally deny Jesus as did Peter, there is yet another word to be spoken.

For in spite of the disciples failure to follow, in spite of their paralyzing fear of the cross, in spite of their abandonment of Jesus, the Gospel ends on an open note of possibility.

From the young man at the tomb, addressing the women, comes yet a third call in Mark. It comes as an invitation to failed disciples to re-enter the game. “Go and tell his disciples **and Peter** that he is going before you to Galilee there you will see him as he told you.”

That is, re-enter the story, and go back to the place of ministry, there you will encounter the risen Christ. And that is God’s word not just to the disciples, it is “God’s word to us. Go to the place of ministry, get involved with the least of these, go embrace the leper, the sinner, the sick and imprisoned, the hungry and the lame. Go embrace the refugee, the undocumented worker, the homeless poor, the unemployed and underemployed. Go, welcome them and in doing so you will welcome God. Embrace them, and you embrace God, and God embraces you.

Amen.