Costly Discipleship Peace Presbyterian Church

Mark 8:31-38 2nd Sunday of Lent

Elizabeth M. Deibert 25 February 2024

The more Jesus heals and teaches, the more the disciples seem to misunderstand what is going on? We are reading in the very heart of Mark’s Gospel today and it will not be easy. Peter, who just named Jesus the Messiah correctly, gets into a conflict with Jesus, thinking that if Christ has so much power to heal and so much authority in teaching, then no harm will come his way. Just the opposite is true. This misunderstanding is repeated three times in the middle of Mark. Jesus says, I’m going to suffer, die and be raised, and then the disciples make it clear that they do not understand what he is talking about. This disturbs Jesus so much that he calls Peter “Satan” in front of the other disciples, saying that he is not thinking of divine things. Peter must have fallen prey to “populist messianic politics.” (R. Deibert, *Mark*)

I’m quite sure Peter thought he had his mind on Christ-like, Messiah things, but he totally missed the mark. He and the others had not understood the cost of discipleship – that being faithful is not about winning but about losing. It is about sacrificing for the sake of others, which is what makes living worthwhile. As Richard Deibert says in his commentary on this Gospel, “Until now, the Christ has disclosed God’s reign in the more visible -- and more popular form -- of strength and triumph. Following this conversation, the Christ discloses God’s reign in the less visible – and much less popular – form of weakness and defeat.”

Prayer: Give us the courage to hear your word of truth, to set our minds on divine things, to be willing to sacrifice as we courageously follow you, Christ our Savior. You who show us the power of the cross in weakness. Amen.

***Mark 8:31-38 (NRSVue)*** ***– Costly Discipleship***

**31**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. **32**He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33**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.”*

**34**He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, *“If any wish to comeafter me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.****35****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.****36****For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?****37****Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?****38****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.”*

What has following Christ cost you? Presumably you have given some time, some talent, some treasure. Have they been true sacrifices? I ask myself the same question I am asking you. Have we ever really gone without something, in order to be Christ’s disciple? Have we truly suffered in order to be generous, to be a blessing to others, or do we just give leftovers? Do you just come to church for your own inspiration or comfort, or are you looking for ways to serve others, to bring comfort to others, to deny yourself for others? Have you ever risked anything for proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ? By positioning yourself directly behind Jesus? Or are you leading the way, like Peter was, and hoping Jesus would agree to follow where you want to go?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the book, *The Cost of Discipleship* in 1937. He contrasts cheap grace and costly grace. He explains that cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, [baptism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptism) without church discipline. [Communion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communion_(Christian)) without [confession](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confession_(religion)). Cheap grace is grace without [discipleship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disciple_(Christianity)), grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer says, is to hear the gospel preached as follows: "Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness." The main problem of such a proclamation is that it contains no demand for discipleship. But costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus. It comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels us to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him into sacrificial living and giving; it is grace because Jesus says: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Bonhoeffer wrote to Reinhold Neibuhr of Union Theological Seminary in NY, when courageously returning to Germany instead of staying safely in the US, saying this: *Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that a future Christian civilization may survive, or else willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization and any true Christianity. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from a place of security.*

Because of his opposition to Hitler, Bonhoeffer was executed in a hanging in 1945, after two years in prison and a concentration camp.

While I am generally a hopeful person I do worry that the nationalism that gradually overtook Germany and led to Hitler’s regime of calculated hatred and murder is growing in our country now. Will we with Bonhoeffer take a stand with Christ, being willing to embrace the cost of discipleship? If we truly follow Christ’s way, we cannot also follow leaders who show no humility, leaders who insist on the value of winning at all costs, leaders who have no contrition or compassion, leaders who make a mockery of the law, and who abuse Christ’s name to promote nationalism.

So called “Christian” nationalism mis-understands the message of Christ even more than Peter and the disciples misunderstood Christ’s message about his suffering and dying. The disciples assumed he would be a triumphant Messiah. Let me be clear. It is good to be a Christian and it is good to be a patriot, loyal to your country, which often means speaking out against what you think it wrong and voting for what you believe is right. But mixing the two into Christian nationalism is bad for both church and the country, as it often confuses good and evil. Why? Because nationalism is a belief that nation groups must be defined by culturally shared traits of language, religion, and ethnicity. Nationalism does not understand that cultural pluralism is here to stay and that we do not need to fear people who are different from ourselves, as long as we respect each other.

The real message of the Christian Gospel gets lost in nationalism, much as it did in Germany when Hitler was determined to purify the Aryan race, aligning himself with the church, determined to win at all costs. The Barmen Declaration was written to oppose this conflation or merging of church with the Third Reich.

The real message of the Christian Gospel is lost when Putin exercises his autocratic control over Russia, seeing to the murder of those like Navalny who oppose him and running roughshod over neighboring countries like Ukraine to gain power and position in Europe.

The Jewish and Islamic faiths are damaged by nationalism – witness the perpetual and now devastating situation in the Middle East. Nationalist governments are usually authoritarian and oppressive. Even our own country, Christian Protestantism was the quasi-established official religion in the early centuries, we did not truly respect other religions and we abused Christianity to justify slavery and segregation. Of this sin, we need to continue to repent, because the generational consequences of those evils are so persistently damaging.

The real message of the cross is foolishness to nationalists, who are Christian in name but not in discipleship. The Apostle Paul worked hard to help the Corinthians and the Galatians among others understand that all national and cultural identity is completely superseded by our belonging to Jesus Christ.

As Jurgen Moltmann said, “The death of Jesus on the cross is the center of all Christian theology. God is not greater than Jesus is in this humiliation and God is not more glorious than Jesus in in this self-surrender, and God is not more powerful than Jesus is in this helplessness and God is not more divine than Jesus is in this humanity.” (from Deibert’s *Mark*) We follow Christ, denying ourselves, instead of force-fitting Christ to our agenda. The Greek word for “deny” is used by Mark only twice – here and when Jesus says Peter will deny knowing him three times before the cock crows. It means to disown. Think with me for a moment about dis-owning yourself. You are not your own boss. You are a follower.

Devoted followers of Christ are willing, if called, to lose country, to lose family, to lose wealth, to lose friends, to lose even life…because following Christ, doing God’s will is so primary. Loving God and neighbor is primary. Following Christ means being willing to sacrifice our comforts to be a comfort to others.

A nation that is influenced, not dictated or controlled, by people who are truly following the way of Christ will be eager to feed the hungry, to set the oppressed free, and to welcome the outcast, and will do so gladly at personal sacrifice – in both taxation and individual benevolence. Are you willing and eager to make those sacrifices? Or are you like Peter, trying to make Christ conform to your worldly ways of thinking and living? Listen to what Jesus said again…this time from The Message:  “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; *I* 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. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for? **38**“If any of you are embarrassed over me and the way I’m leading you when you get around your fickle and unfocused friends, know that you’ll be an even greater embarrassment to the Son of Man when he arrives in all the splendor of God, his Father, with an army of the holy angels.”

If you have decided to follow Jesus, put on your spiritual seatbelt, you going on a journey, and the pathway, speed, direction, transportation, and destination are not yours to choose.