

God Saves Us By Sacrifice (and Inviting Us to Follow)

That the Word Might be Saved 2

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Mark 8:31 - 9:1, Psalm 22:23-31

Introduction

Last week we began a new sermon series on *That the World Might Be Saved*. In that message, we looked at how God's love comes and meets us where we are. We named Jesus as the bearer of God on earth who seeks us out at the edges of life, and meets us to heal and restore us. Today we will turn to the nature of that love, about how God saves with sacrificial love, and Jesus' invitation to us to love in the same way.

In our gospel text today, we are at a crossroads. Up until this point in Mark's gospel, things have been on a swing upward – Jesus' new way of approaching God and life has been bringing him recognition, and a new way of living seems to be thriving and taking hold. Jesus has not only reached the faithful in the region of Judea, but also in the mixed area of both gentiles and Jews where he has just performed a miracle of feeding four thousand.

A new community seems to be forming, a new way of living outside the ways that have kept people separate, and dominated by structures beyond their control. You'd think Jesus would be on a high, but an argument breaks out when Jesus asks his disciples who he is. Peter says that he is the Messiah, the Anointed One, the one who will come to save the people, as promised in the Hebrew scriptures. For a moment, Peter shines brighter than all the other disciples.

This is something that must be kept a secret, for Jesus tells them not to say anything about them. The Messiah was often envisioned as the new King, the new ruler, who will throw out the tainted regime that conspires with Rome to keep the common ones poor. But the disciples are confused? How could Jesus overthrow a government if no one knows about it?

Jesus has more to reveal. He tells them that it is necessary for him to undergo great suffering, to be rejected and be put to death in Jerusalem, then rise again. We can almost feel the shock volts are running through the disciples. Then Peter speaks and completely disagrees. He argues with Jesus. Jesus tells him off, then grabs both the crowd of followers and the disciples, and tells them the way of discipleship. They are to

- deny themselves
- take up their crosses
- and follow

It's a tense moment for all concerned, where the disciples and the crowd receive a shocking surprise, for Jesus' vision is at odds with what they expect from a messiah.

I'm taking the Stephen Leader training for five weeks on Zoom, so I can be a Stephen Leader for our wonderful Stephen Ministers in our congregation. One of the skills that is emphasized in this training is *assertiveness*. Now this is different from being aggressive or passive. For example, if I'm out with a friend and she wants to stop at a store to do some shopping, but I have to get home quickly, I have roughly three options – to be quiet about needing to get home and fume privately (that's being passive); get into an argument with my friend about being totally inconsiderate about my need to go home now (that's being aggressive); or the third option – to state that I need to get home now, and work out a solution.

Jesus was deft at mostly being assertive about the mission he was on (and intentional when he used other approaches – we'll look at one example later on in Lent). In this passage, Jesus makes very clear here who he is (affirming what Peter said), and what his mission will entail. He makes clear the sacrifice from love for the world that he intends to make, and will not entertain anyone trying to push him from this goal.

Parents and others who love deeply know this. The other day I was getting my hair cut and colored, and somehow in my conversation with my hairdresser she said in jest, "I could have been rich, but I had children instead." We both laughed and laughed! She isn't rich-rich and of course doesn't care about that, which is why it was so funny. I know her deep Christian faith, and her abiding love for her son and daughter. She's provided for her son recently as he's gone through cancer treatments, and is now in remission.

That deep sacrificial love is deep within our congregation as spouses support one another through serious illness, and parents care for their children, and members care for friends and other family members. Grandparents who have taken on caring for grandchildren during the pandemic to help families make it, and friends who do shopping for those who can't get out.

The Sacrificial Love

In such circumstances, the grace of what Jesus was giving to the world begins to get clearer.

When Jesus says, “deny yourself,” he’s talking about acting with sacrificial love for others so that all might thrive in the community.

When Jesus says, “take up your cross,” he’s asking people to intentionally love so much that they are willing to commit sacrificially for a better world.

When Jesus says, “follow me,” he is asking people to take risks of being the kind of community you can be passionate about, to engage in life-giving ways of the Jesus communities. We’re invited to follow a way of life that is centered on practices of mutuality in serving and love, where the community will care for all in its midst, and provide a way of life that is a model for others.

Theological abuse of being committed to the wrong Jesus way.

About that “carry your cross”: I also want to say what this does not mean. It does not mean that people who are being abused should consider this “a cross to bear.” Historically, African American slaves in the US south and the Caribbean were told that their slavery was their cross to bear and that their reward would be in heaven. Even today, many of the poor around the world are told that this is their lot in life, but the next one (in heaven) will be better.

This same story has also been used to keep women in their place. I heard of a woman at a shelter for abused women who thinks that she should stay with her abusive husband because it’s her “cross to bear,” even though her own son is being abused too.

The Joy in the Way

Here’s another part of the good news: Jesus is way more concerned with creating this new way of living, thinking of being a disciple as living into “the way” so that belief will follow. This is the kind of community that we’d like to be in too – one in which people value each life, no matter the status or wealth, or ethnic group, or zip code.

This kind of community isn’t for sale. You can’t buy it. You have to make it yourself with other folks committed to the same thing, a just world for everyone.

How Committed Are You?

But creating this takes commitment. It isn’t borne on a wing and a prayer. Here’s how it worked in one congregation.

In her book *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, Susan Beaumont writes about a member of her home church, Anna B. Quick, who through her

steadfastness love kept the small congregation afloat during long periods without a pastor a century ago. Every Sunday she would come to the rundown church building, unlock the doors, turn on the lights, and keep vigil in the sanctuary just in case someone showed up. She filed the annual paperwork to keep the church a legal entity. Over time, conditions changed, and the church began to thrive again.

At least, that's how the story was told. When a recent pastor dug into the details, he discovered that things changed only after Quick and a few others started giving boldly and sacrificially of their time and money to hire a pastor, tear down the old building, and raise money for a new facility and new ministries. Quick and others denied themselves, took up their cross, and followed where it led—not to some remote mission field, but to a profound offering of self in the name of following Jesus.

Friends, we are invited to follow Jesus
wherever he may lead, to find ourselves and our lives.

Amen.