

Series: Depths of Love
Sermon: For the Sake of the Gospel
Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

Second Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2024
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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 want to become my followers, 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."

Have you ever been hoodwinked by one of those very smooth, charismatic salespersons? You know the kind I'm talking about. They read you like a book when you come in the door, intuitively picked up on your triggers, and in a matter of minutes know just what needs to be said in order to convince you to buy their product. This is the kind of salesperson that will convince you that you need this so bad, you will suddenly be willing to receive the gift of financing so that, for no money down now, this beautiful thing can be yours in just ten easy payments at 18% interest. I've had a few regretful purchases because I got caught up in letting someone convince me, "you can't go wrong by buying this." Obvious, I only later discovered, "Oh yes, you can! and you have!"

If there is one thing about Jesus, he isn't trying to hoodwink anyone. Charismatic, maybe, but also bluntly and plainly honest. We can listen to some evangelical leaders and hear them tell people that praying the sinner's prayer is all you need for salvation. That once Jesus is in your heart, all your troubles will go away. You can send them seed money and their prayers will get you out of debt. If you go to church and claim Jesus, you can pray for the front row parking spot at the mall, and it will be yours. If you give money to the church, God will bless you with the things of your heart, like a boat or a house. No, I'm not making this up, I've heard preachers make all these promises. They make for a good sales pitch, don't you think? Who wouldn't want to sign up for a religion like that? You can't go wrong by buying into that, right?

We all want to hear that what we are "buying into" is something that will bring us joy, fulfill some desire, provide some happiness. Our faith can do all those things! We want people to know about it, to experience the joy and fulfilled desire and happiness. And then Jesus shows up. Before this scripture text, Jesus has been explaining to the disciples that he is indeed the Messiah. They had to be thrilled. Much of Jewish faith had been centered around the expectation that God would send them a Messiah, someone like Moses, who would lead them through this "wilderness" of Roman occupation. The entire Jewish nation, persecuted and oppressed by Rome, was looking for someone to come and liberate them. They had to sit around that campfire at night and think, "Wow,

I can't believe I'm lucky enough to sit next to Jesus. I can't believe that any day now I'm going to be on the front line of resistance in the fight against Rome. Not only has the Messiah come, but he chose ME to go with him!" It had to be a good feeling, believing there was only good things to come from here on out. I mean, when an all-powerful God gets involved, surely things are on the way up. Then Jesus spoke. He spoke, not against Rome, but warning them that their own faith leaders would misunderstand him, reject him, and he would die as a result of that rejection. It was not the Jewish nation, not the Jewish people...who rejected Jesus but the leaders who were so consumed by keeping peace and protecting their people from Rome's wrath, that they feared any hint of rebellion, or protest, or dissent. They knew that Rome, although oppressive and controlling, allowed the Jews freedom to worship as they desired. They allowed the temple to run fairly unbothered. But Rome's threat constantly hovered over them – cause trouble and we will tear the temple down and you will no longer be able to practice your faith. We will block you from worship, was their arrogant threat. So, the Jewish leaders are trying to keep peace and save their right to religious freedom and the Jewish people, living under the burden of excessive taxation, are trying to find someone who will come and set them free. We can't blame the leaders for not recognizing Jesus as savior, because sometimes we don't either.

When Jesus begins speaking, Peter is not in the mood to have his dreams crushed. He is not ready to hear about Jesus suffering, being rejected, being killed, and being raised on the third day. Peter may not have even heard that last part because he was so distraught over the others. How can Jesus be Messiah and yet be rejected? How can we be winners if suffering is our future? How can we be walking toward victory if our leader is going to be dead? So, Peter pushes back. He rebukes Jesus. Mark doesn't tell us what he says but it is enough that Jesus calls him Satan and tells him to fall back in line. But we notice that it isn't because Jesus is angry with Peter that he tells him to step back, it is because Peter is missing the mark. Peter is missing the purpose of the Messiah. "you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

I suppose we are all guilty of that, aren't we? Isn't that the reason this text makes us as uncomfortable as it did Peter? Our mind is on human things...having our basic needs met, being able to live the American dream of a house and two cars and 2.5 kids and a dog. Our mind is on human things of being happy, finding joy, doing good along the way, having trusting relationship, and finding life fulfilling. So, like Peter, we want to push back on the idea of suffering and rejection...of death, even in light of resurrection. We want to push back against taking up the cross and following Jesus if the only place he is headed is one we've been trying hard to avoid – none of us want burden and suffering.

So, maybe this is why we need Lent...a season of self-reflection...a time to reorient ourselves to God and to help us see the divine things, not just the human things. We need Lent to remind us to pray, not in order to tell God what we want God to do, but to listen to God and learn what God wants US to do. We need Lent to remind us to study the scriptures and look for a deeper understanding of God. When we do that, for

example, we might learn that when Jesus says, “take up the cross and follow me...he might have actually been inviting the people to understand non-violent protest, or what we might call sacred resistance.

See, Rome used crucifixion as punishment for political or religious agitators, for pirates, slaves and those who had no civil rights. When Jesus says, pick up your cross and follow me they would have understood this, not as a call to willingly walk a life of suffering, as some might think, but to intentionally live a life of loving, self-sacrificing, work for justice. When the cross is used as a tactic to silence people, Jesus says pick it up because your actions will be louder than your voice.

This isn't new teaching from Jesus, this idea of non-violent protest and sacred resistance. He taught it in the sermon on the mount as well – if someone strikes you, turn the other cheek – which isn't a weak move, it is a defiant one. When someone asks you to carry their pack, which Roman soldiers were allowed to ask anyone to carry their pack for up to a mile – Jesus said, carry it two – again, an act of defiance.

The call to take up the cross doesn't mean we are to live a life intent of suffering for the sake of suffering. To take up the cross means we are to live a life that endures the burden of seeking justice in the world...as we strive for a more loving, sacrificial, and generous life...not just for ourselves but for everyone. Turning our mind to divine things means we may not even recognize that what we are enduring as suffering...we may see it only as taking a stand for the right, the good, the just, the merciful.

Jesus may not have been a charismatic salesman; he doesn't just tell us what we want to hear. He is truthful about the cost of discipleship...the price of following him. He is honest about the weight that will burden us when we look at the world and see it is not as God wants it to be. He is honest about the suffering that comes with that realization and the splinters and pain we will endure as we take a stand to right what is wrong. I'll be honest and say I'm troubled with what many who identify as Christians believe right now – that it is their right to inflict suffering on others so that they themselves do not suffer. I am troubled by the rise in antisemitism and how people feel justified in hatred and oppression. That is not the way of the cross...that is the way of Rome. For the sake of the Gospel, we need to know the difference.