

“Becoming Followers”
Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25;
Mark 8:31-38

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Poor Peter. Here we have Peter struggling with what is going on. It's not that long after when Jesus told Peter he would be the rock on which he built his church. Maybe that went to Peter's head a little bit and he's beginning to think he should be taking that role on, to the extent that he should tell Jesus how it should be. He doesn't want Jesus to suffer and die and he probably doesn't understand what Jesus means by "rise again." So he brings his perspective to Jesus.

We talked about this in the description of the Transfiguration, how Peter told Jesus it was good for them to be there. Now he's telling Jesus, "This is not good for you to do." He needed, I guess, a little attitude perspective adjustment. And so Jesus does that for him. He says, "Get behind me, accuser. Don't tempt me or attempt to change what is about to happen."

Peter wanted to tell Jesus how it should be. I think one of the things he forgot in the midst of that was that perhaps God was in what Jesus was talking about. I don't think it works to tell God what to do. The idea is to listen to what God is inviting us to do. The trouble is that's not always easy.

Jesus is suggesting that Peter is paying attention to human things and not divine things. That seems to be the crux of the issue. It seems to be one for me. It seems to be a lot easier for me to pay attention to human things than to divine things.

It is that line that leads Jesus to turn to the crowd and say, "If you want to follow me..." If you want to follow me, you have to trust. You have to believe. You have to hear what I'm saying. The Romans passage reminds us of that. It is a passage that focuses on how it is the faith, the trust, the belief that engages us in that relationship with God and that allows us to hear and to do. Because Jesus says, "If you want to follow me, if you want to trust me, if you want to believe in me, then deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me."

As I think about that idea of following Jesus through trust and denying of self, I realize what I generally do is go with what I know. It almost like an instinct. Or I'll go with the way I've come to see the world. That's what Peter did. He knew what the Messiah was supposed to do. He knew he was right. Jesus wasn't following the script.

When Jesus asks us to deny ourselves, it is sometimes to ask us to deny what we think we know, what we might believe, what we're so sure of, and to take up our cross and follow him. I'll talk more about what it means to take up the cross, but first, for the sake of the good news. Remember Jesus begins in Mark by talking about the good news of the kingdom coming near. The good news is the kingdom coming near. And I want to suggest that "the kingdom" is a shorthand way of talking about a new way of life,

a new way of following. It's letting go of human things and paying attention to divine things. It's listening to Jesus. It's that new culture that Jesus is inviting us into, because it's God's kingdom, God's culture, God's way. When he's talking about *for the sake of the good news*, it's about living into that place where God is the one who is our priority, who is in charge, who is showing the way. It's the place where we may hear God's word so that we may do God's will and live God's way.

In general, that feels pretty good. I think I want to hear God's word, to do God's will, and to live God's way. But why does he add this bit about "take up your cross and follow me?" It feels like he's inviting us to realize that as we trust in him, as we follow him, as we believe in him, that it's not always easy. When he says, "Take up your cross and follow me," I don't think he's saying, "All suffering is following me." I've got a little sciatica going on right now and that feels a little like suffering sometimes, but I don't think it's taking up my cross. I think it's just some pain that I've got in my life.

Sometimes we do things wrong. We do things that cause suffering in our lives. That's not taking up our cross to follow Jesus either. Suffering itself isn't something we can judge to determine whether we are doing God's will. However, if we decide to listen to the word of God in Jesus Christ, and to do God's will, and to live God's way, we'll be paying attention to divine things and not human things, and there are sometimes conflicts.

In the Psalm we hear about God paying attention to the cry of the afflicted. It feels like that's one of those places where there's sometimes real tension between the ways of the world and the ways of God. God wants to pay attention to the afflicted. God wants to pay attention to those who are hurting or oppressed. Sometimes it feels like what the world wants to pay attention to are the successful, to celebrate the success, to allow the successful to be successful on the backs of others and not pay attention to whose backs they are successful on.

Sometimes when we follow God's will, when we hear God's word and do things God's way, as we follow Jesus, there may be some ways in which we struggle. We have conflicts with the world around us. It's easy to look to examples of famous folks. The ones that come to mind are Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa. Yes, those are people who have looked beyond themselves, denied themselves so they might do what is good, what is God's will in some way. But it's not just those famous people. It's people who have done the work along the way. The people who walked with Martin Luther King on the Selma bridge were attacked just as much as he was, and some more. Yet, who knows the names of most of those people?

I think there are other ways in our lives that we do things. I have a friend who could have been wealthy with consulting contracts, and going to schools and charging them a lot of money to help them run their schools better. But instead, he focused on one school district in a place that needed help. He went and taught with the teachers in that school and helped change the perspectives and ways of doing things in that particular school. He stayed in touch with the students and continues to teach them in the

process. He didn't make as much money. There's a way in which he carried his own cross because he didn't do what the world considered to be most successful. But he was looking to divine things. He was looking to see how he could carry out the love of Jesus Christ in the midst of a school setting.

I think there are lots of people who are doing that. People who have decided that they are going to do a particular thing in spite of what the world tells them to do because it's right for their patient. It's right for their community. It's right for the students they teach. It's right for their friends and family. It's right for their country.

There are lots of people carrying their own cross. It doesn't always entail a physical suffering, but sometimes it does entail some conflict. But I want to be careful about that because it's not because we have conflict we know we're following Jesus. Conflict may arise because we're following Jesus, but we can't always use it to determine that we are. We have to pay attention to the word of God, the will of God, the way of God.

As Jesus invites the folks to follow him, one of the ways he describes that is to deny oneself, to lose one's life – at least in the eyes of the world and sometimes in our own eyes – because it's inviting us not to focus on ourselves, but on the word and the will and the way of God.

As we become followers of Jesus, we may have our attitude adjusted from time to time. We may be a little like Peter. Indeed, Lent is a time when we think about those kinds of adjustments that have happened and are in the process of happening. As we become followers of Jesus, it involves trusting Jesus, having faith in Jesus, believing in Jesus enough to hear how he challenges us and invites us to be different, to let go of human things, and to pay attention to divine things. Denying self so that we might do God's will. Becoming followers of Jesus means the world may not appreciate how we attend to God's word, God's will, God's way. It may not appreciate when the church pays attention to the afflicted rather than the successful. It may not appreciate it when we pay attention to the persecuted rather than the persecutor. We, too, may have to take up our cross and bear it in the name of following Jesus. The shame of humans set aside so that we might honor God, so Jesus need not be ashamed of us as we attempt to live as those who are becoming followers of Jesus, listening to the word, the will, and the way of God. Amen.