

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

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“The Hard Way”

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Mark 8:31-38

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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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.’

Rev. Keith Wagner tells the story of Georgene Johnson, a 42 year old resident of Cleveland, OH. Georgene was worried about putting on a few pounds as she got older so she starting running and exercising to keep in shape. She said, “I’m not going to look like I am 42 or at the very least I am going to look like a good 42!” She did pretty well in her running and soon she thought she would try a little competition. She entered a 10K race, 6.2 miles. Nervous about her first race, she got up early and arrived at the start of the race. To her surprise there were a lot of people milling around, stretching, and getting ready. All of a sudden a voice over a bullhorn said, “Move to the starting line.” A gun sounded, and the crowd was off, like a huge wave sweeping past Georgene. She joined in. She was in the race!

After about four miles it occurred to her that the runners should be turning around and heading back toward the start/finish line. She stopped and asked an official by the side of the course “Why isn’t the course turning around?” He said to her, “Ma’am, you are running in the Cleveland Marathon. That’s twenty-six miles. You’ve got nine more miles before you turn around.” It seemed that her event, the 10K run did not start until 30 minutes after the marathon. By arriving early, Georgene got involved in a race that she really didn’t want to be in. She could have stopped right there, but to her credit, she kept going and finished the marathon. Afterward she said this, “It wasn’t the race I trained for, it wasn’t the race I entered. But I choose to join. For better or for worse, that was the race I was in.”

In this morning’s Scripture lesson, the gospel of Mark describes what has been called the turning point in Jesus’ ministry. After this particular event, things move quickly for Jesus—to Jerusalem, to betrayal, to arrest, and to the cross. Here Jesus and his disciples were walking near the village of Caesarea Philippi. In casual conversation Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” They answered “John the Baptist, Elijah, or even one of the prophets.”

He then asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter rises to the bait, "You," he says confidently, "you are the Messiah!"

Having established this thought Jesus begins to teach his disciples about what is to come for him in the future. He "must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law." He "will be put to death, but three days later will rise to life." These words must have stunned the disciples. The plan didn't seem to fit a Messiah. So Peter, still quite confident, rebukes Jesus. But Jesus' rebuke of Peter is even stronger, calling his disciple nothing less than Satan. And then Jesus fills in the job description of discipleship even more. Not only is there to be a cross in the future for Jesus, but there is one in the path of anyone who would follow him. "Take up your cross and follow me." Self-denial, sacrifice, and following the example of Jesus are to be the marks of the faithful disciple.

Now baseball great Yogi Berra once said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." One can only imagine that at the precise time, Peter and the other disciples needed to hear Yogi's advice. They were given a choice but there seemed to really be no choice. Up until then, the path that they were following was the easy way. Jesus seemed like a pretty good investment. Certainly, they had to leave their lives of fishing behind. But they had been witnesses to some pretty amazing stuff- miracles, healings, and great teachings. Surely they believed that these things were a foretaste of things to come. But now they had come to this fork in the road. "Take up your cross and follow me." Jesus now promised suffering and rejection and death. This was enough to produce a crisis of faith in anyone.

Take up your cross and follow me. This isn't an easy thing for me to hear. I mean, crosses are fine decorating the wall of our meeting house or hanging around our necks, but cast upon our backs! Perhaps like Peter, I might wish my faith would protect me from suffering, bring me security against all ills, and give me the ultimate victory in life. Here at Meadowbrook, we have a new committee meeting to look at ways in which we can better market our church. Just imagine trying to get someone to come join us by saying, "Come, suffer and be rejected with me!"

William Willimon writes of a church that did a study of its membership trends. In the past two years they had received fifty new members. It seemed the church's evangelism program was working. Unfortunately, those same statistics showed that nearly twenty of the new members received fell away from membership during their first year there. What were they doing wrong? One lay leader accused the church of false advertising. "We entice folks to come here, telling them we have friendly folk and a church that will take care of their problems, and then they join up and find out that the church has more problems than they do at home." Another layperson disagreed. She said, "I think the problem is Jesus. He is demanding and difficult. They get lured here thinking that church is the solution to their problems and then they meet Jesus and find out that he is the beginning of the problems they have spent their whole life avoiding." Willimon writes that the cross-carrying, cross-giving Jesus offers a choice that drives people away.

Jesus speaks of taking up a cross not merely bearing a cross. Ben Witherington III writes that "saying 'we all have crosses to bear' is a great perversion of Jesus call to take up our crosses!" Taking up a cross does not refer to putting up with arthritis, surviving a serious accident or disease, or tolerating your annoying in-laws. All of these things and more may come into our human life and may require faith to get through but they have no direct connection with the life of discipleship. The hard way for Jesus is not about self-inflicted pain, senseless martyrdom, nor even normal human trial.

Jesus described true discipleship as a harder way. Take up your cross and follow me. Taking up a cross means nothing less than realigning your life toward God's perspective. It means dying to self so that we can all live in harmony with one another. It means letting go of

our quest for more security, more power, more possession, and more knowledge. The self to be denied is the self that seeks to control and dominate others, to use others for its own end, and advance its own interests at the expense of others. Taking up a cross is not just any kind of suffering. Taking up a cross is suffering for God's intention in the world, a commitment of one's self to something greater than one's individual needs.

In his book *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, Walter Bruggemann defines evangelism as "the invitation to re-imagine our lives...an invitation to switch stories and change our lives." We may think that the story of our lives is the search for happiness, fulfillment, and the joy of overcoming life's problems. In a real way, we'd like our lives to end like a good movie. But Jesus asks us to participate in a new story. The goal of life is no longer to avoid or overcome problems. It is to be prepared to give up life for the sake of the God's way, and to see the trials and tribulations we experience as a result of our faith, as steps on the way to the cross. We are to find meaning not in success but in struggle because it is in the struggle where we will find the model of Jesus.

Fred Craddock tells the story of a wealthy man who went to a priest with a check for \$50,000 made out to the church. With great pride he handed it over to the priest. The priest looked at it. It was a tremendous amount of money. It would meet many of the immediate needs of the church. Yet he simply handed it back to the man. "This is too easy," he said. "Go and cash it in. Cash it in for quarters and dollar bills and spend them one at a time in doing God's work." The man was shocked at the priest's response. "But that will take the rest of my life!" The priest nodded and said, "That's right. That's the point!"

In this week's *Alban Institute* web article entitled "Ministry in Hard Times," author Dan Hotchkiss writes about what the current economic crisis can teach us as followers of Christ and as a church. Hotchkiss says some things we already know as we walk the path of tight finances. These times "require us to relearn concepts of stewardship and planning that stress thrift, the clever use of resources, and the courage to say no to low priorities." In these tough times, this is the cross we bear. However Hotchkiss then points out a new learning, something akin to the hard way of Jesus. He says "The implicit mental model is that the congregation's first duty is to sustain its institutional core- to maintain the building, service the debt, meet the payroll, and keep the lights on. If there is any money left, we can then speak of mission, outreach, service, innovation- as if these were optional extras." Hotchkiss writes that in making hard choices, we never forget the true purpose of the church and of knowing what we must afford to do to take up our cross and to follow Jesus.

Jesus' words are haunting. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me. Everything about it seems so hard, so difficult. Yet that is the point Jesus wanted to make. He promised that in our frantic desire to save our life, to build our own security, to insure our own success, we would lose our lives. And he promised that if we would dare throw away our lives with him, to offer of what we have to others, to take upon ourselves the burdens of another- then we would find the true source of life. Jesus taught that the point of following him was not simply to listen. Take up your cross and follow- the hard way.