

“Acknowledging Our Resistance and Overcoming It”

Mark 8:31-38

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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As most of you know, I was not raised in the church. My parents had bad experiences with organized religion. My mother was disillusioned by the church’s resistance to integration, its negative response to her divorce and its dismissal of the very idea of a woman being as career-oriented as she was. My father was an SAS operative in the Middle East and viewed religion in general to be part of the problem, not the solution, most of the time. So, I was raised outside the church.

At fifteen, I was allowed to attend church, since I was old enough then to think for myself and I went first to a youth group meeting partly because I had a genuine interest in spiritual things, as most adolescents do, and partly because the friend who invited me said there were good-looking girls in the group. My friend was right, but they were not the only reason I kept going. I was interested in matters of faith, captivated by Jesus and by the age of seventeen I was ready to profess my faith.

My youth minister, a friend and guide to this day, was my primary mentor in this time, but before I came forward, I had to talk with the pastor of our church who would baptize. It was a helpful conversation. It was good to get to know him, something I had not had an opportunity to do, he was a kind and gentle man and an experienced pastor. What I remember most, though, is that after everything we talked about in terms of who Jesus is and what baptism means, his final statement to me was, “Well, this is something you should do only if you absolutely have to.”

It is not the normal statement ministers make to potential church members and baptismal candidates. Most do whatever they can to get everyone possible down the aisle and in the water. And I don’t know that he said this to every potential candidate. He may have sensed something different in me. But I think I know what he meant.

Christian faith is no casual undertaking nor is it simply a way to purchase one Get-Out-Of-Hell-Free Ticket. It is a whole new way of

life wherein we accept the grace we are offered in Christ, place our trust in God and then seek to follow Jesus not just in a nice kind of life, but in life lived in the way of the cross.

In baptism we confess Christ as our personal Savior *and* Lord, and the Lord part was actually the earliest Christian confession. “Jesus is Lord,” early believers would say. Jesus is not just my way of deliverance from sin, but my guide for all of life, my example, and the example he sets is by going to a cross. It’s only fair that the person professing faith understand this from the very beginning.

As Glenn Hinson used to say, quoting a professor he knew, “If they come running like hogs after slop, it ain’t the Gospel!” Or as Will Campbell observed, “Jesus did not say, ‘Take up your cross and relax.’”

Despite what is preached from many pulpits today about Christian faith being mostly about things we believe in our heads, this reality of faith being about a whole new way of life is found throughout the Christian Testament, including our reading today from Mark.

It is a familiar story, but a dangerous one, if we take it seriously. Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, but now he reveals the fact that he has no idea what this means. For Jesus predicts for the first of three times that he will suffer and be killed and then be raised, but Peter argues vehemently with Jesus, says this must never happen, “rebukes” him, the text says.

The verb, *epitemesen* in the Greek, is the same word used in Mark for silencing unclean spirits and savage forces. It will be used repeatedly in this brief exchange and both Peter and Jesus will do this to the other, which underscores the reality that this is not a gentlemanly dispute. It is a heated argument.

What Peter says to Jesus is, “Shut up!” and not in the playful colloquial sense. “Shut up! Peter says, to which Jesus replies, “No, you shut up! You don’t know what you’re talking about.” And then, he goes a step further, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Get behind me, Satan? That’s pretty harsh. It may be that Jesus is using the term in the general sense of adversary, as opposed to The

Adversary, The Evil One. But even if he is, he is still saying that Peter is functioning as The Evil One would, opposing his path to the cross.

We can understand why Peter would. He has a different understanding of the term Messiah, that of a political deliverer, and he probably would like his new friend and mentor to live. That's not really a bad thing. Sometimes people who love us says things we don't like, such as, "Please make an appointment to have your annual physical," or, "Don't eat so much fast food," or, "Don't drink so much," or, "Please exercise more." But the reason they say these things is that they'd like to keep us around a little longer. Their motives are noble.

So may Peter's motives be, we don't really know, but even if they are, what he says is still adversarial. Jesus is headed to the cross. Peter doesn't have to like it, he certainly can't understand it at this point, but he must not oppose what Jesus is doing. Jesus intends to lay down his life for his friends, indeed for the whole world.

Now, we get this because we've been in church most, if not all, of our lives. We've been told what the cross means – God's identification with us in suffering, God's offer of forgiveness and love. We get this, and if the story ends here, we can work with it, even come to like it. It's a rough deal for Jesus and perhaps Peter and the other disciples, but for us, it just means salvation and we are so removed from crucifixion that we really don't appreciate viscerally just how brutal it is. We human beings have thought up all sorts of brutal ways to kill each other, but crucifixion is right up there with the worst.

The trouble is the story does not end here. Jesus goes on to pull in a crowd that has gathered and then says not just to the disciples, but also to the crowd, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. 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." In other words, the cross is not just for Jesus, but for all who follow him.

Mark Twain once said "It ain't those parts of the Bible I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." This is one of those parts for most of us. If we are not bothered by what Jesus says here, we have not understood what he means.

So, what do we do with this text? What do we do with this demanding call to discipleship given by Jesus himself? Mostly we avoid it or sanitize it, clean it up for popular consumption. We say it only applies to certain people or explain it in such a way that we can find it more palatable and thus drain all the power out of it. We refer to all sorts of tiny burdens as the crosses we have to bear – cooking his meals or hers every day, rubbing her feet or his each night, putting up with some irritating idiosyncrasy. It is our cross to bear, we say, quite nobly.

But Jesus isn't talking about nickel and dime tasks and irritations. He is talking about taking up a real cross. We want no part of this, yet we know it is our calling. So, what can we do? As with all the other kinds of frailties we are talking about this Lent, we can begin by facing our challenge directly, by acknowledging our resistance to Jesus' call.

In the current issue of *The Christian Century* (January 31, 2018, p. 21), Emily Heath shares a couple stories about people who have resisted Jesus' call. The first is a young professional she talked to several years ago who said she felt called to devote her life to mission work. This was not someone else's suggestion, but her own inner sense of calling. But she said she feared doing so because she had grown accustomed to a certain standard of living and feared leaving it. So, she didn't. The second is a ministerial colleague who felt God was asking her to stand up for an unpopular cause in her community, but couldn't work up the courage because she was afraid her congregation would dismiss her. "I believe in dying for a cause," she said, "just not this young."

Heath says she shares these stories not as examples of awful people, but because these two women are a lot like us. They are good people, but with seemingly reasonable concerns that end up putting them in the role of adversary to what they believe God wants them to do. But at least they can acknowledge their struggle and that is a beginning. We cannot deal with a demon until we name it. We cannot overcome our resistance to anything, including divine intent, until we admit it to ourselves and acknowledge that it is an issue.

Once we have acknowledged our resistance, it might also be helpful to make sure we understand what we are talking about. We are not talking about nickel and dime tasks and irritations. We are talking

about taking up a real cross, a real burden. But this doesn't necessarily mean dying literally, though this may be the case for some. It means giving up something vital of ourselves for others. It means sacrificing something important in order to accomplish something nobler, in order to fulfill a higher calling.

For example, I think of parents who radically alter their lives to care for children with special needs, spouses who lose themselves in caring for their beloveds around the clock for months and years, adult children who look after their parents in the same way. They all take up a cross, though they do not think of what they do as a burden, it is an act of love, which is what carrying a cross as Jesus does means anyway.

I think of people who give up lucrative careers in mid-life to pursue vocations based solely on service. I think of ministers and others who risk their jobs and careers speaking to issues that aren't just political, but affect the lives of people they love, as a church in Cary this week has spoken up for a church member threatened with deportation. I think of teachers who risk and sometimes give their lives to protect their students when a shooter enters their school.

Taking up our cross can take many different forms, but it always involves real sacrifice, it is always done in love, and it is always worth everything we put into even, even though this may not be something anyone else can understand. Perhaps all of this can help us to overcome our resistance and claim our calling.

But one other thing I would add is that taking up a cross is a central calling of Christian faith, at least if Jesus is our guide. It is not a special category of sacrifice for a chosen few like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It may not take on the same form for all of us, but the basic calling to self-denial and sacrifice does apply in some way to us all.

I think of a conversation Clarence Jordan had with his brother Robert. Clarence had begun an intentional Christian community in rural Georgia in 1942, a community where resources were shared and people of different races treated each other as brothers and sisters. As time passed and racial tensions grew, the community, Koinonia Farm, came under attack, and so Clarence sought the help of his brother Robert who later became a state senator and justice of the Georgia Supreme Court.

When asked to help, Robert said, “Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got.” “We might lose everything too, Bob,” said Clarence. “It’s different for you,” said Robert. “Why is it different?” asked Clarence, “I remember, it seems to me, you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

“I follow Jesus... up to a point,” said Robert. “Could that point by any chance be – the cross?” asked Clarence. “That’s right,” said Robert, “I follow him to the cross, but not *on* the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.” “Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple,” said Clarence, “You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you’re an admirer not a disciple.” “Well now,” said Robert, “If everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t *have* a church, would we?” “The question,” Clarence said, “is, ‘Do you have a church?’” (*Biography as Theology*, James McClendon, pp. 127-128).

It is a pointed exchange between brothers which ends with a provoking question. Some might think the question is extreme. I think it might be the most important question facing the contemporary church in America. What matters most is not how many people a church can gather in a room or what size budget it can support, but whether or not we are following Jesus and as a result, whether or not we are a church.

The calling to deny self and take up a cross does not look exactly the same for everyone, but it does apply to everyone. Each of us must discern our calling, name our resistance and find a way to overcome it.

In his book *Prayers*, Michel Quoist put it this way (pp. 171-2).

Lord, you stretch at full length on the Cross.

There.

Without a doubt, it was made for you.

You cover it entirely, and to adhere to it more surely, you allow
men to nail you carefully to it.

Lord, it was work well done, conscientiously done.
Now you fit your Cross exactly, as the mechanic's carefully filed
parts fit the engineer's blueprint.
There had to be this precision.

Thus, Lord, I must gather my body, my heart, my spirit,
And stretch myself at full length on the Cross of the present
moment.

I haven't the right to choose the wood of my passion.
The Cross is ready, to my measure.
You present it to me each day, each minute, and I must lie on it.
It isn't easy. The present moment is so limited that there is no
room to turn around.
And yet, Lord, I can meet you nowhere else.
It's there that you await me.
It's there that together we shall save our brothers (and sisters).

Indeed, let it be so, amen.