

## ***Losing One's Life for Others***

**Mark 8:31-38**

**Lent 2B**

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I mentioned on Ash Wednesday that I often give up something for Lent. What I give up is some small way for me to connect with the sufferings of Jesus. I'll be the first to admit that much of my "suffering" has been a lot less burdensome than for others.

One year I gave up cookies. I like cookies – a lot. Another year it was ice cream. I love ice cream. And still another year it was meat. Though I'm not a big meat-eater, that might have been the hardest test of all.

Mind you, I took the high road on this with my fellow staff members. I passed out a PETA flyer – that's "People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals." I was entitled: *Jesus Was a Vegetarian*. No kidding. It argued that because Jesus was concerned for the poor and oppressed, there was no way he could have eaten meat. PETA's claim is silly and self-serving, of course. I'm pretty sure Jesus was not eating tofu lamb at the Passover meal with his disciples in the Upper Room. Still, I had a fun time passing along that flyer to the staff and acting just a little bit holier-than-thou.

In response to my vegetarian high road, there was inevitable payback. I got anonymous pictures in my mailbox of succulent steaks and chops, glorious cheeseburgers, and even a full-color spread of Famous Dave's ribs. *Yum*. That wasn't very nice of the staff, was it? Then again, I probably had it coming.

Our gospel for today takes a much more serious tone in depicting the cost of following Jesus. In the paragraph before today's reading, and while on retreat at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciple: "Who do people say that I am?" Peter is the first to raise his hand: "You are the Messiah." Peter is excited beyond words. He looks at Jesus and sees a king, a king on his way to Jerusalem to claim his crown, a king who could finally conquer the Romans.

But Jesus' next words strike like a tolling bell. He begins to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be killed. Peter immediately challenges him: "Lord, this must never happen to you! Besides, this is not exactly what we signed up for either." Jesus pulls Peter aside and

rebukes him: “You’re not thinking God’s thoughts, Peter. You’re thinking only of yourself!”

Perhaps you’ve seen the bumper sticker: “Don’t follow me. I’m lost.” That’s what Peter is likely feeling at this point...about Jesus. “You must be lost, Rabbi. Who in their right mind would choose a path leading to a cross?”

Jesus senses hesitation from the group. But instead of softening his message, he doubles down. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up *their* cross, and follow me.”

*Gulp!* Did he say *their* cross? Suddenly the disciples have a decision to make. They must decide if this rabbi is “lost” in his thinking or not. Would it be sheer foolishness to follow him further? They could still go back to their old lives – fishing and farming and tax collecting. It’s not too late!

I suspect that for Jesus’ growing band of disciples, this might feel a little like learning to jump off a diving board – and in this case, the high-dive. Whether you’ve tried it or not, you can probably imagine it. You let go of the railing and begin to take hesitant steps down that narrow, sandpaper-like board. The farther you walk, the more you feel a shiver running up and down your spine. When you reach the end, you peer over the edge, and *gasp*. The water is so far down that it looks like the Grand Canyon. Sure, others have gone before you and have lived to tell about it. Yet your natural reaction is to inch backward and grab onto the railing for dear life. Right then, you yourself have a decision to make: to keep hanging on or to go forward and jump.

The retreat at Caesarea is a critical juncture on the road to Jerusalem. Again, the number of disciples has been increasing. But clearly this won’t help with recruitment! Some of Jesus’ followers decide to “hang on” to what they know; they play it safe and head home. But not the Twelve and a few others. After taking a deep breath, they let go of the railing. Even though they can’t see much beyond the end of the diving board, they choose to dive in.

Why do you suppose that is? This might go back to why they started following Jesus in the first place. Maybe because Jesus gave Peter and Andrew, and James and John, something to believe in that was bigger than fishing. Maybe because he shared some badly needed forgiveness with the likes of Mary Magdalene and Mattew. Maybe because he was willing to make room for ragged characters like Judas.

Jesus gathered a community of common people around him. They were not nicer or brighter or braver than the rest of us. They regularly missed the point and jockeyed for position. The only qualification for going along seems to be their willingness to rise to their feet and say yes when Jesus came calling.

Beyond that, maybe they said yes because this was the most valuable thing that had ever happened to them – like discovering a pearl of great price. No doubt, some people would be willing to sell everything to have such a pearl! And yet, they couldn't buy it. It would take all the money in the world. But to hear Jesus tell it, "You can have it for free...you can have his love and life and forgiveness and peace for free...if you really want it. All you need to do is ask...and then be willing to follow.

So, friends, what do you say? Jesus sharpens his invitation: "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 response to this claim, imagine praying a prayer that goes like this: "Lord, here I am, back on the diving board, with my toes curled over the edge. Use me like you've never used me before. Use me to bring hope to someone mired in despair. Use me to soothe someone's pain. Use me to pass on faith to my children and grandchildren. Use me to help a broken person understand how infinitely valuable they are in your sight. Use me to patch things up in a world that's too often in conflict, sometimes with a neighbor just down the street or with a person sitting in a nearby pew.

"Lord, truth be told, I'm tired of paddling in the shallow end of the pool. I want to plunge into deeper waters. I want you to use me as your eyes and ears and hands and feet in a world that needs you now more than ever."

Friends, what do you suppose it might mean for you to lose your life for the sake of another? You don't really know, do you? That's the risk. Consider this first-person account from Pastor William Willimon about a doctor, some parents, their pastor, and a baby. "The doctor spared few words," writes Pastor Willimon. "'Your baby is afflicted with Down's Syndrome. I had expected this, but things were too far along before I could say for sure.'

"The mother asked hesitantly: 'Is the baby healthy?' The doctor replied, 'That's something I wanted to discuss with you. The baby is healthy. But it does have a slight respiratory ailment. My advice is that you let me take the baby off the respirator. That might solve things. At least it's a possibility.'

“Well, it’s not a possibility for us,’ said the parents. The doctor responded, ‘I know how you feel, but you need to think about what you’re doing. You already have two beautiful children. Statistics show that people who keep Down’s babies risk a higher incidence of marital stress and family problems. Is it fair to do this to the children you already have? Is it right to bring this suffering into your family?’

“At the mention of suffering,” writes Willimon, “I saw the mother’s face brighten as if the doctor was finally making sense. ‘Suffering?’ she asked quietly. ‘We appreciate your concern, but we are Christians. Christ suffered for us, and we will be ready to suffer for this baby, if we must.’

“As he continued making his rounds, the doctor whispered to me, ‘Pastor, I hope you can do something with them.’ Two days later, the doctor and I watched the couple leave the hospital. They walked slowly, carrying a small bundle; but it seemed a heavy burden to us, a weight on their shoulders. We felt as if we could hear them dragging it down the front steps of the hospital, moving slowly but deliberately into a cold, gray March morning.

“It will be too much for them,’ the doctor said to Willimon, shaking his head back and forth. ‘You ought to have talked them out of it. You should have helped them to count the cost.’”

Willimon concludes: “But as they left, I noticed a curious look on their faces. They looked as if the burdens were not too heavy after all, as if it were a privilege and a sign. They seemed borne up, as if on another’s shoulders, being carried toward some high place that the doctor and I would not be going, following a way we did not fully understand.”

My friends, the “way” these parents were going is a way rooted in love. *Love makes a way*. We’ll soon sing a hymn that puts it like this: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” It was not unlike the way of the cross for Jesus’ disciples. These two parents, who were followers of Jesus, were willing to lose their lives for the sake of another. And though the burden they were carrying was heavy, it was not too heavy, for Jesus would be there helping them to bear it.

The parents had made their decision. They had picked up their cross. They were going to follow Jesus by taking their baby home. And I have a feeling that they would never regret it. Amen.