Take Up Your Cross!

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at Light Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore,
on Sunday, February 7, 2016.

Mark 8:27-9:8

This morning we come to the halfway point in Mark’s gospel and a critical turning point in Jesus’ ministry. Up until this point, Jesus has been portrayed as a teacher and a healer, even a miracle worker able to walk on water and multiply loaves and fishes to feed thousands. Now, with Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus is identified as the long-awaited Messiah, the Anointed One, the one commissioned by God to establish God’s eternal reign of justice and righteousness, the promised Deliverer and Savior whom prophecy foretold and in whom all the promises of God would be fulfilled! It is also at this point that Jesus’ ministry in Galilee ends and his journey towards Jerusalem begins.

Peter and the other disciples had great expectations of the Messiah. They expected the Messiah to be a powerful, divinely ordained leader, who would save them from the political oppression of Rome and rescue them from the economic exploitation of the rich and powerful. They expected a liberator who would drive out the Roman occupiers from their land, restore the Davidic monarchy, and return Israel to its rightful place among nations.

So, when Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples that he (Jesus) “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed,” they can’t believe their ears. A suffering Messiah makes no sense to them. It is completely contrary to their expectations. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. "Jesus, what are you talking about? Suffering? Rejection? Death? You are the Messiah! That can’t happen to you!"

As I listen to this passage, I’m right there with Peter: "Jesus, it isn’t fair! It's just not right! Of all people, you shouldn’t have to endure such things. You work miracles. You feed the hungry. You heal the sick. You’re innocent -- without sin. Surely you can't be serious about having to suffer, be rejected, and die!"

But Jesus rebukes Peter (and us): "Get behind me Satan!" Our protests are seen as efforts to dissuade Jesus from following the path that God has set before him, the equivalent of Satan tempting Jesus in the desert.

Jesus then speaks to the disciples and the crowd. He speaks to all of us: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Notice that Jesus does not assume that those he has called his disciples up to this point will remain as his disciples. “If any want to become my followers,” he says. He gives them an out. Maybe self-denial, suffering, and rejection are not what they had in mind. Maybe that’s not what they thought they signed up for. If so, they can make their way to the exits. At the same time, Jesus also opens the door to those in the crowd who are not yet counted among his disciples to make the decision to become his followers.
To follow Jesus, to be a disciple of Christ, involves "taking up one's cross." It involves denying one's self and putting Christ at the center of our lives. In this sense, Christian discipleship is profoundly countercultural. Contrary to what you may have heard from some television preachers, being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not about being successful by the world’s standards. It’s not a path to prosperity. “What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” Jesus asks.

Following Jesus isn’t about being rich and famous. It’s not about having it all -- a new car, a beautiful house, the most up-to-date technology. It's not about being liked and respected by others. It's not about being comfortable and secure. No, Christian discipleship involves focusing our lives on Christ instead of on ourselves. It involves being Christ-centered instead of self-centered. And when we put Christ at the center of our lives, there may very well be a cost involved. We may very well face suffering, rejection, even death, because of our faith.

Following Jesus could result in your losing some friends. It could strain your relationships with family members. It could result in the loss of your reputation. It could involve losing your job. For Christians in some parts of the world, these are very real consequences.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, the 20th-century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer made a distinction between what he called “cheap grace” and “costly grace.”

“Cheap grace,” he wrote, “is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.” Cheap grace says: “Yes, of course, you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness.” Cheap grace does not demand discipleship.

“Costly grace,” by contrast, “confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light.’”

“Costly grace,” Bonhoeffer continues, “is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. . . . It is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. . . . Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘ye were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.”

"Those who want to save their life will lose it," Jesus says, "and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Following Jesus Christ is a matter of life and death. It isn’t something to be taken lightly. Following Jesus Christ leads to the cross. It involves sacrifice. But it also holds out the promise of new life, of
resurrection. Don’t forget that Jesus also spoke of his resurrection: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected . . . , and be killed, and after three days rise again.” If we die with Christ, we will also be raised with Christ; we will be given new life.

No one ever said being a Christian was supposed to be easy! But that’s what we’d like it to be. When Jesus starts talking about taking up one’s cross, we start having reservations. Suffering? Rejection? That’s not exactly what we had in mind. Many of us would rather be admirers of Christ than followers of Christ.

What’s the difference between an admirer and a follower? The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard makes this distinction: "A follower is or strives to be what he admires. An admirer, however, keeps himself personally detached. He fails to see that what is admired involves a claim upon him, and thus he fails to be or strive to be what he admires."

"To want to admire instead of to follow Christ," Kierkegaard says, "is not necessarily an invention by bad people. No, it is more an invention by those who spinelessly keep themselves detached, who keep themselves at a safe distance. Admirers are related to the admired only through the excitement of the imagination. To them he is like an actor on the stage except that, this being real life, the effect he produces is somewhat stronger. But for their part, admirers make the same demands that are made in the theater: to sit safe and calm. Admirers are only too willing to serve Christ as long as proper caution is exercised, lest one personally come in contact with danger. They refuse to accept that Christ’s life is a demand. In actual fact, they are offended by him. His radical, bizarre character so offends them that when they honestly see Christ for who he is, they are no longer able to experience the tranquility they so much seek after. They know full well that to associate with him too closely amounts to being up for examination. Even though he says nothing against them personally, they know that his life tacitly judges theirs."

Will we be followers of Jesus Christ, or admirers only? In the end, it is our choice. "If any want to become my followers," Jesus says, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Ultimately, it is up to us whether we throw our lot in with Jesus Christ or not. Will we get up off the couch and become active participants in our chosen faith, continuing Jesus' work in the world? Or will we simply be passive observers, remaining at a comfortable and safe distance, worshipping Jesus from afar.

Being a Christian means being more than an avid admirer of Christ. Being a Christian means taking up our cross and following Christ. It means taking risks for the sake of Christ and the gospel. It means putting Christ at the very center of our lives. May God give us the courage and strength to do so. Amen.