

We Are Not Our Own
A Sermon on Mark 8:31-38
Second Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2018

Introduction

“Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” If you could sum up the Gospel of Mark in one sentence, that would be it.

Scholars have varying interpretations of what this verse means. Is it political? Are we being encouraged to be martyrs, just like Jesus? Is it metaphorical? Does it mean simply that followers of Jesus will face hardship? Is it spiritual? Does it mean that we should deny our desires? I think it is all of the above.

The first four weeks of Lent are a time for renewing our baptismal vows. Unpacking this verse can help us understand what it means to be baptized into a new way of life as followers of Jesus.

First Move: Rebuking Satan

Jesus has just asked the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Some say, “John the Baptist.” And others, “Elijah.” And others, “One of the prophets.” Peter alone says, “You are the Christ.” That is the same confession we make when we are baptized or when we transfer our membership to a new congregation. Mark’s readers would have approved of this response.

But Peter is still blind to who Jesus really is. He doesn’t understand what it means to be the Christ.

The Greek word, Χριστός, means the smeared one, to be smeared with oil. That sounds just as strange in Greek as it does in English. It refers to the practice of pouring oil over a king’s head when he takes the throne in Israel. The oil is a symbol that the king will bring fatness to the land. King of the Jews is one possible translation for the Christ. That is the title that the Roman soldiers hung over Jesus’ head on the cross.

The Jews hadn’t had a king in several centuries. They longed for a Messiah to rise up and reestablish Israel as an independent kingdom. The Messiah was expected to be a king like David, a warrior king, who could liberate the people of Israel from foreign rule.

After Peter calls Jesus the Christ, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. Jesus never calls himself the Christ in the Gospel of Mark, but he refers to himself 14 times as the Son of Man.

The Son of Man is an eschatological title. It first appears in the Book of Daniel, Chapter 7, when Daniel has a vision of one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. God, or the Ancient of Days, will sit in judgment of the four great beasts that have ruled the world. An angel explained to Daniel that the four great beasts represented four great empires that had oppressed Israel: Babylon, the Medes, Persia and Greece. The Ancient of Days hands over an eternal kingship to the Son of Man to rule over the people of the earth as a fully human being instead of as a beast.

Jesus says, “It is necessary for the Son of Man to endure great suffering and to be rejected by the elders and the high priests and the scribes and to be killed and after three days to rise again.”

Jesus is conflating the image of the Son of Man with the Suffering Servant from Second Isaiah. There are four servant songs in Isaiah. Most scholars believe that Isaiah was referring to the people of Israel as the servant. Mary read one of the servant songs [Isaiah 52:13-53:12] at Morris’ funeral. “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our inequities, . . . yet he did not open his mouth.” God exalts the servant and lifts him up; that astounds the nations. “Kings will shut their mouths because of him.”

Scholars believe that today’s text more likely comes from the author of the Gospel of Mark than from the historical Jesus. It reflects the understanding of the early followers of Christ as they tried to make sense of the cross. They looked to the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah and conflated them with traditional images of Messiah and Son of Man.

This is the first of three Passion Predictions in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus tells the disciples what to expect when they get to Jerusalem. Jesus predicts that he will endure great suffering and be killed, then rise again after three days. Scholars believe this prediction is more likely a historical reflection by Mark than a forward-looking prophecy by Jesus.

Peter takes hold of Jesus and begins to rebuke him. The Greek word for rebuke is the same word that is used when Jesus rebukes demons and tells them to be quiet and when Jesus rebukes the wind in the stilling of the storm. Peter is acting like a teacher to Jesus instead of like a disciple. Peter will not accept this understanding of what leadership is about. He believes that the Messiah will be a great warrior like David who will lead Israel to glory and liberate them from the Romans. The Messiah doesn’t endure suffering; he inflicts suffering on the enemies of Israel.

Now Jesus rebukes Peter. Jesus says, “Get away from me. Get behind me, Satan.” Peter is like the people of no faith in the Parable of the Sower. The seed is scattered along the road. Satan immediately comes and removes it. Jesus rejects Peter’s attempt to persuade him that suffering is unnecessary. Peter is literally in his way to the cross.

Second Move: We Follow a Crucified Christ

Jesus begins teaching the disciples about what it means to follow him. He tells Peter, “You are not fixing your thoughts on things of God but on things of men.” Peter is thinking in terms of conventional human wisdom instead of the things of God. God’s way of thinking violates common sense. It is human instinct to respond to violence with violence. Jesus is telling his followers that in God’s way they will suffer much, they will absorb the violence in their own bodies instead of responding to it.

That brings us to the key verse: “If anyone wants to follow behind me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.

Deny is the opposite of confess. After Jesus is arrested, Peter will deny Jesus. One should deny oneself rather denying Jesus, as Peter will do. The Greek word for deny can also be interpreted more broadly to mean, to disregard or to renounce. To disregard one’s self, to renounce one’s own selfish desires, to curb one’s instincts.

Taking up the cross is the first time that the cross is mentioned in the Gospel of Mark. When a man was condemned to die on the cross, he was stripped naked, scourged, or beaten with whips, and forced to carry the crossbeam of the cross to the gallows. The vertical post was already in place. The condemned man carried the horizontal crossbeam naked through the streets. Crucifixion was a political and military punishment. It was inflicted on the lower classes, slaves and violent criminals. It was intended to demonstrate that they were totally without honor and power.

Jesus explains this verse with three more sayings that can be read spiritually. The first is, “For whoever desires to save his life will destroy it, and whoever will destroy his life for the sake of me and the good news will save it.” This is essentially how we understand baptism: we die to our old way of live and rise to new life in Christ. The second saying: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to forfeit his life?” This is a critique of looking at your life from a commercial or material perspective. The third saying, “For what may a man give in exchange for his life?” Your life is worth more than riches. New life in Christ fills our lives with meaning.

Today's text concludes with another Son of Man saying: "For whoever may be ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man also will be ashamed of him whenever he might come in the glory of his father with the holy angels." This verse is dripping with eschatology. It refers to the Last Judgment, when the Son of Man acts as Judge to reward the righteous and condemn the unrighteous. Intertestamental texts [texts that were written after the Old Testament and before the New Testament] often compare the time of judgment to the days of Noah. Genesis 7:1 says that God found Noah to be the only righteous man in a violent and sinful generation.

Political New Testament scholars like Ched Myers interpret, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me," literally. Jesus is telling his disciples that they if they want to follow him, they will be challenge the injustice of Rome and be crucified themselves. The Gospel of Mark was written during the war in 66-73 CE when Rome ultimately defeated the Judeans and burned down the Temple. Jesus' followers may have been enduring persecution from Jewish Zealots for refusing to take arms against Rome. Ched Myers wrote his commentary on Mark, *Binding the Strong Man*, in 1988. He was a missionary priest in Central America in the 1980s. These were the days when Oscar Romero was assassinated while blessing the Eucharist and the six priests on the faculty of a Jesuit seminary in El Salvador were murdered. Taking up your cross sounds like a command for political action and martyrdom in those contexts.

I read this text more broadly. I don't think you have to be a martyr to follow Christ. Denying yourself is virtually synonymous with the message from last week's text, "Repent and believe in the good news." Stop fixing your thoughts on things of men. Change your way of thinking. Start thinking of the things of God.

Give up your image of a triumphant Christ. We don't need to be triumphant. The culture values achievement, success and power. We are not measured by success. We follow a crucified Christ. We seek a cross not a crown. The risen Christ is still the crucified Christ.

Third Move: Denying Your Tribe

Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr and John Dear, these heroes of faith fix their thoughts on things of God. They find their True Self by looking past partisan politics. That doesn't mean they withdraw from the world. Seeing the unity of all things leads them out into the world to be agents of healing.

Gandhi was intensely political *and* spiritual; he never stopped loving his enemies. Gandhi said that he wanted the British to leave India voluntarily, as friends. Gandhi was cheered by the people of England when he visited in 1931. He lived

among the poor in London for two months while he attended the Round Table Conference to discuss constitutional reform in India.

Partisan politics consumes us, especially the last two weeks, as people respond to the shooting at the Florida high school by taking sides in the gun debate. They are talking past each other. They are making no attempt to understand each other. It is like we are living in a reality TV show—conflict and drama have become part of our lives. We are regressing to tribalism, thinking things of men. We are responding from reptilian instincts instead of out of spiritual discipline.

Our baptism should mean something. We are not disciples of Obama or Bernie or Trump. We are disciples of Christ. People who believe differently are not our enemies. They are children of God.

Taking up our cross in white, middle class America can mean identifying with the people without status in our society, the ones who are crucified by the system. The people on death row, the poor who are victims of mass incarceration, the undocumented immigrant who has no country. It can also mean identifying with our enemies, or the people we perceive to be our enemies.

Ched Myers calls a spiritual reading of this text bourgeois exegesis. [Exegesis means studying the Bible and drawing the author's original meaning out of the text.] I see it as following Jesus in our context. We are not an oppressed minority. We are rich by the standards of the entire global population. It is a rare person who can give away all their possessions to the poor. The good news for us is freeing us from self-absorption and captivity to a partisan political culture. Liberation means we are free to be slaves of Christ.

“We are not our own.” That is Calvin's phrase. [This may be the first time that I have ever quoted Calvin in a sermon.] He is paraphrasing the apostle Paul, who said in 1 Corinthians 6:19, “You are not your own.” You belong to Christ. If your bodies are members of the body of Christ, should you make them members of prostitutes? Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God.

Denying yourself can mean putting away childish things. Deny yourself means deny yourself *and your tribe*.

When we studied *The End of White Christian America* on Wednesday nights last fall, we learned that Millennials have the lowest church attendance of any age group. Surveys show that they are turned off by the politics in church, both on the left and the right.

I think that Millennials are sending a message that the church needs to hear. Too much of the political talk that comes from church leaders, on the left and the right, sounds like partisan politics, with a thin theological veneer.

I was asked this week to sign a pastoral letter on gun violence. It was sent to progressive pastors and seminary professors all over the state. The authors wanted everyone to sign the letter and publish it in the newspapers in Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

I greatly respect the authors of the letter, but I didn't see anything pastoral about the letter. It sounded like the same talking points that progressives have been using in the nationwide debate about school shootings. It cried out against what it called "the sickness that has infected us, this dedication to guns." The only theological language in the language was in calling this dedication to guns and the Second Amendment idolatrous. They said that God demands that our idolatry of guns must stop.

I emailed the pastors who wrote the letter and told them that although I shared many of the feelings and beliefs that they expressed, I was not willing to call all gun owners idolatrous. A few members of this congregation own guns and a few of my friends own guns. They generally oppose the ownership of military weapons by private citizens. They could be allies if they are not insulted. I fear that the letter will be heard by gun owners as calling all gun ownership idolatrous. I don't believe that shaming people is helpful, or non violent for that matter. Gun ownership is rooted in Southern culture, a frontier ethic and an agrarian way of life. It is part of military culture and urban culture. When gun ownership is so deeply rooted in identity, it will be fiercely defended unless we begin the work of creating a new identity. If we challenge all gun ownership, our voice crying out in the wilderness will be heard as just another shrill, partisan voice with a theological veneer. I asked the authors of the letter to clarify that the idolatry lies in supporting private ownership of assault weapons or military weapons. If they made that change, I would sign the letter.

I received no reply to my email. That was a mistake. I preach on Sunday mornings.

I am not advocating that we withdraw from politics, but that we follow the example of the heroes in faith and transcend partisan politics.

Martin Luther King was willing to alienate his political allies. In the last two years of his life, he campaigned to address poverty for all people, black and white, and to oppose the war in Vietnam.

He received harsh criticism from African-American leaders for expanding the focus beyond civil rights for African Americans. Dr. King saw the underlying problem was poverty rather than racism, and that white people suffered from poverty just as much as black people did. He wanted the support of poor white people, whom many liberals demonized as racists and poor white trash.

Dr. King was an early opponent of the Vietnam War. He saw the connection between war and poverty. He recognized that the poor were sending a disproportionate number of their sons and daughters to fight in the war. Lyndon Johnson was offended by Dr. King's activism against the war. LBJ felt that King was ungrateful for his work in steering the civil rights legislation through Congress. Civil rights advocates told Dr. King that peace and civil rights don't mix, that he was hurting the cause of his own people.

The truth of Dr. King's vision is borne out by his address at Riverside Church in New York City in 1967, *A Time to Break Silence*. He has just as much insight into the causes and motives for the Vietnam War as Ken Burns does 50 years later in his recent documentary on Vietnam on PBS. Dr. King's political beliefs were based on his timeless theological convictions:

Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.

Conclusion

If we are going to deny ourselves, pick up our crosses and follow Jesus, then we must deny our partisan affiliations and stop demonizing people whose politics we disagree with.

John Cobb, one of the leading theologians of the past half century, suggests that progressive and evangelical Christians can begin to overcome this partisan divide by studying the Bible together. We might find that there is much we agree on and build on that. After all, we treasure the same stories of Jesus. When we disagree, we might learn from listening to each other and actually deepen our own understanding. We might find Christ in each other.

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