

Jim Gill

February 25, 2018

"Following Jesus"
Genesis 17:1-7 Mark 8:31-38 Romans 4:13-25

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS 17:1-7

Last week we read about God's covenant with Noah that never again would the world be destroyed by flood. This morning we read about another covenant that God makes-this one with Abram. Even though he and his wife Sarai are beyond the age of having children God promises that Abram will be the father of many nations. Hear the word of the Lord from Genesis 17:1-7

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 8:31-38

This morning we now fast forward to the beginning of the last week of Jesus public ministry. Jesus has fed a crowd of 4,000 with seven loaves and a few fish. He has cured a blind man which moves Peter to declare that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God. Immediately after Peter's declaration, Peter rebukes Jesus and then Jesus rebukes Peter and issues a challenge. Hear the word of the Lord from Mark 8:31-38

Let's Pray,

Lord we confess that if we had been in their situation only knowing what they knew that we would have said, "May it never be." We hear these words of challenge from the other side of Easter. Still, may Jesus' words to those first followers fall fresh on our ears and call us to follow them in following you. Bless to our reading and our understanding these words of yours from your Holy Word.

A little boy who was just learning about addition and subtraction in school looked up during Worship one Sunday, saw the cross sitting on the altar and hollered, "Look, Daddy! There's a plus sign in our Church."

The cross really is a plus sign. It's a plus sign in our lives daily. It tells us of what God has added to our lives from subtracting the guilt of our sin through Jesus' sacrifice. Through the cross God transformed a horrible instrument of torture and death into a symbol of life and hope. God transformed tragedy into triumph; humiliation into glory; despair into hope. God took what was ugly and cruel and violent and transformed it into a symbol of peace.

When Jesus lay out the cost of following him Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Why? Peter believed the kingdom of God could be obtained by force. Peter had a worldly view of the Kingdom and Jesus is speaking about a heavenly kingdom. For a moment I would like you to listen to this story through the eyes of Peter and the rest of the disciples. I want you to think of Jesus only as a military leader. Imagine that your country has been invaded and is being ruled by godless men. Sense, now, that the tension is mounting and you are about to go into battle to conduct a coup d'état. Imagine that you and this band of ruffians are

going to attempt to overthrow this government by a sudden violent strike. Imagine that the odds are stacked against you but you have a very strong belief that God is on your side despite the overwhelming odds.

Now you are thinking like Peter. Now imagine that Jesus comes before his disciples and lays out his military strategy. In essence Jesus is saying to them, "We are going to march into Jerusalem. You are going to lose your lives and I, your General, will suffer many things. Furthermore, we are not going to get any help from our Jewish brothers the Elders. Even the Chief Priest and the Sadducees will not join us. Our government the Sanhedrin is corrupt and can be of no help to us. We are going it alone and I will die in this battle."

Jesus spoke plainly to his disciples about the events soon to transpire. Peter was not able to shake his understanding of Jesus as his General so he pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. In essence he is saying, "Lord, this is not a very good military strategy. You are not going to die, don't say that. It's not good for morale. We are going to be there with you and we will fight to the end and we will throw these godless Romans out of Israel, you will ascend to the throne in place of Herod, and we will be at your right and left hand as the new leaders of Palestine."

It is fascinating to note that just before Jesus rebukes Peter back, he turns and looks at his disciples. It is as if Jesus is putting two and two together and realizes that Peter is saying what they all felt. It is a perilous moment in the life of Christ. He must dispel this error from their minds and teach them the meaning of his mission. So, he rejects Peter outright calling him a tool of Satan and says, "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

To address the confusion Jesus pulls his disciples together and brings them before a crowd. And in front of the crowd he corrects the disciple's aspirations for privilege, rank, and power and he gives them this simple little directive: You must take up your cross and follow me. This morning I would like to ask the question "Why must we carry a cross?" Here are three reasons we must do so.

First, we must carry a cross to remind us that we are not the center of the Universe. Suffering is part of our discipleship as Christians. It is characteristic of great leaders to make demands upon their followers. When Winston Churchill became Prime Minister he told the British people that he had nothing to offer them but "blood, toil, tears, and sweat".

Jesus was a thousand times more demanding. Jesus said, "So, therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." Possessions cannot stand between you and the Lord. Even something as noble as the love of family, as good and right as that is, cannot stand in the way of commitment to the Kingdom of God. Laziness, fear, selfishness, family--nothing can stand between us and the call to discipleship. Jesus Christ demands our obedience.

Jesus is not some wishy-washy little fellow coming up to us, hoping to win our favor, saying softly: Please sir, may I have a word with you." He comes to us as the Lord of History and makes His demand: Take up your cross and follow me." 1

One of the reasons so many people hold the Armed Forces of our country in such high esteem is that we know that the men and women who volunteer for the service are willing to make the supreme sacrifice. Someone has said that a veteran is someone who, at one point in their life, wrote a blank check made payable to The United States of America for an amount up to and including their life. What if the world knew that followers of Jesus had that same level of commitment?

Service does not always come with big fancy ribbons. And I think that it is forever true, that it is often the humble acts of service that provide us with the deepest sense of joy and the most fulfilling satisfaction. Jesus said those who are willing to lose their life for my sake shall find it. I am persuaded that true discipleship is taking up our cross and following Jesus. .

Secondly, we must carry a cross to remind us that there are others who suffer and that we must fight for justice in the lives of others.

This is the last Sunday in Black History month, so I want to share with you about Harriet Tubman. She was a brave woman who escaped slavery during the Civil War. Despite a huge reward for her capture, she returned to the slave-holding states over nineteen times to lead hundreds of African-Americans out of slavery's clutches into territory where they could live with liberty. Harriet Tubman was a Christian and she became a great warrior in the battle to dismantle the cruel institution of slavery. When asked about the source of her fearless strength, she would always say: "It wasn't me, it was the Lord. I always told him, 'I trust you. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me.' And he always did."

Harriet Tubman, dubbed "the Black Moses," was never captured, and there are countless stories like these, and new stories are being told daily. They are the stories of Christian people who learn to lead because they keep rediscovering what it means to be one who even then was following Jesus.²

All around us there are wrongs that we must correct. The cross we carry is our reminder of that fact. It is a sad episode in the life of the church but even we, Jesus' followers, have been the perpetrators of some of the most horrific crimes and we have done these crimes claiming that it was God's will. That is why I was grateful some years ago when the Pope's performed an act of public contrition as he spoke on behalf of—as he put it—all the "sons and daughters of the church." He begged for forgiveness for a millennium of atrocities, from the Crusades, to the Inquisition, to the Holocaust.

Though it may take time, if we keep carrying the cross, we may learn that others suffer as we do and that sometimes even we are ourselves are perpetrators of the hatred and violence which others are suffer.

Finally, we carry a cross to remind us that we are responsible in part for the cross that Jesus carried. That haunting old Negro spiritual that we sang this morning gives the refrain "Were you there when they crucified my Lord." The emphasis is on the "you." If we were to be perfectly honest, we would have to answer yes, I was there. Yes, I had a role in this. It is only as we come to that understanding that we can then sing the last part of the hymn: Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Some would respond by saying that happened in the past and it has nothing to do with me. It was an act committed by pompous Romans and self-righteous Jews. I was not there, say these persons, and that is that. To take that position is to miss the point of Jesus' words, "Take up your cross and follow me."

Jesus does not simply want us to remember his cross as something he himself suffered on our behalf. Instead he told us to take up our own cross. I think by that he meant that I must so identify with the event of the crucifixion as to see ourselves in the story. It is not simply His story; it is our story as well. I think that is it most tragic if we go through this entire Lenten season and never fully understand our role in the whole crucifixion drama.

Yesterday at our Men's Breakfast we heard from George Colon who is the new Director of Spiritual Care and Values Integration at San Jacinto Hospital. He shared his testimony of his call to ministry from a job where he was responsible for raising \$72 million dollars a year. Part of what called him to that was the death of his 15 year old daughter in his house in his arms. Years later he realizes that his own loss has helped him in his ministry of being present and experiencing empathy with others who are going through grief and experiencing the comfort of the Holy Spirit as they continue to grieve. His cross to bear has helped him help others bear theirs.

This morning we will re-commission our Community of Hope Lay Chaplains as they commit to another year of coming alongside members of our church community when they are suffering. They have had similar training and some have had similar experiences so that they too can offer a listening ear and shared empathy with those who are hurting.

In his book Kingdoms in Conflict, Chuck Colson writes about the time that the government of Polish Prime Minister Jaruzelski had ordered crucifixes removed from classroom walls, just as they had been banned in factories, hospitals, and other public institutions. Catholic bishops attacked the ban that had stirred waves of anger and resentment all across Poland. Ultimately the government relented, insisting that the law remain on the books, but agreeing not to press for removal of the crucifixes, particularly in the schoolrooms.

But one zealous Communist school administrator decided that the law was the law. So one evening he had seven large crucifixes removed from lecture halls where they had hung since the schools founding in the twenties. Days later, a group of parents entered the school and hung more crosses. The administrator promptly had these taken down as well.

The next day two-thirds of the school's six hundred students staged a sit-in. When heavily armed riot police arrived, the students were forced into the streets. Then they marched, crucifixes held high, to a nearby church where they were joined by twenty-five hundred other students from nearby schools for a morning of prayer in support of the protest. Soldiers surrounded the church, but the pictures from inside of students holding crosses high above their heads flashed around the world. So did the words of the priest who delivered the message to the weeping congregation that morning. "There is no Poland without a cross." 3

This last week students marched to the capitol of Florida. Some even met with our President to express their grief and to call for action to stop school shootings. They are protesting the loss of life of their friends and of children and teachers who have lost their lives at the hands that held guns. They aren't marching to keep crosses in their buildings. They are marching to keep guns out of their buildings.

We live in a society where being "first" means everything. People want to be number one or be part of a group that is number one. Competition is the name of the game. Their motto is "win, win, win, me, me, me."

Jesus ruins our winning formula by saying the phrase, "For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." Jesus promotes an ethic of "servanthood." Not only are we to lose to win, we are to "deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him."

Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated orchestra conductor, was asked, "What is the hardest instrument to play? He replied without hesitation: "Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists, but to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm or second French horn or second flute, now that's a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony." 4

Children of God are born, but disciples are made. The Great Commission Jesus said, "Go and MAKE disciples of all nationalities, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey what I have commanded you."

One man who took that Commission all over the world died this week. Billy Graham once said, "Someone asked me recently if I didn't think God was unfair, allowing me to have Parkinson's and other medical problems when I have tried to serve him faithfully. I replied that I did not see it that way at all. Suffering is part of the human condition, and it comes to us all. The key is how we react to it, either

turning away from God in anger and bitterness or growing closer to him in trust and confidence.”

The call to follow Jesus is a call to a radical lifestyle. It is a call to offer our lives as a living sacrifice. That means our values ought to reflect our faith, our budget ought to reflect our faith, how we relate to others ought to reflect our faith. Every area of life ought to reflect our faith.

Why must we carry a cross? To remind us that we must suffer for Christ's sake, that there are others in this world who suffer, and that ultimately we are responsible for the indignity and shame which Christ suffered upon the cross. We have a choice. We can lay down the cross we have been given to bear and passively live our lives with no challenges, or we can take it up and be transformed, living for something greater than ourselves. Jesus called Peter and the rest of his disciples and he calls us to not only count the cost but pay the cost of taking up our cross, our real plus sign, and start or continue experiencing the fulfillment we are offered by spending our days and nights...following Jesus.

Let us pray

O God whom we trust in childlike faith, we give you thanks for setting apart Abraham and Sarah as parents in faith. We draw courage from their example of obedience. From them we gain confidence that you will never forsake us. What to us is beyond belief in you becomes possible.

We thank you for Jesus who taught what it means to be obedient unto death. In his earthly ministry he showed the way of discipleship. We are heirs of his words and example. We give thanks that you have revealed your wisdom and continue to involve us in your kingdom.

We praise you for the Holy Spirit, who sustains us amid doubts and trials. When earthly pressures weigh upon us and we are near despair, your Spirit brings releases, giving encouragement to lighten our burden. You alone are the assurance that strengthens, the light that illuminates, and the truth that dispels doubt. You are the source of all hope. We can endure if you abide with us as you have promised.

Be with those who suffer this day.

You are indeed our God. We give you thanks that you see fit to look with favor on us in this time and place. For Christ who nourishes and the Spirit who sustains, we give you all praise and bless your name!

1. Life at the End of the Line, by **Keith Wagner**
2. Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way, by **Harvard Stephens**
3. Kingdoms in Conflict, by **Chuck Colson**
4. ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by **Brett Blair**