

How to Save Your Life

Mark 8:31-38

Almost every Christian sanctuary has one. They are made of burnished mahogany and of rough-hewn timbers. They are forged of polished brass and twisted wrought iron. They are given shape by magnificent stained glass and crudely backlit Plexiglas. They bear depictions of the broken body of Jesus and are as bare and unadorned as a barnyard gate. Almost every Christian sanctuary has as its focal point the symbol of the cross of Christ; and though each congregation, employing the criteria of its own architectural style, tradition, and theology, chooses the way in which its particular cross is depicted, the presence of the cross of Christ universally marks a sanctuary as Christian worship space. In most Christian sanctuaries there are other symbols, of course: pulpits and Bibles, candles and communion tables, seats and rails. But the one reliable symbol, present across the denominational spectrum in most churches, is the cross of Christ.

This is fitting, for all the New Testament books point to the cross as the defining center of Jesus' redeeming work. However it is understood, his death on a Roman cross bridges the wide gulf of sin and death that separates human beings from God. Without the crucifixion, the definitive triumph of God would not have been made visible in and through the resurrection. The cross of Christ, however it is rendered and presented in Christian worship space, is the central symbol of the faith, the fitting end of the journey of Jesus of Nazareth. As Paul Tillich has taught us, as symbol it not only points beyond itself but participates in the reality to which it points, namely, the saving love of God for humanity.

Our scripture is one that I learned about as a youth. My assignment was to find the unanswered questions in the Bible. My father directed me to my pastor, who

pointed me to this passage. Rev. Fletcher said questions without biblical answers were: What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? And, what can they give in return for their life? I had no idea of the real meaning of these verses to the Christian life – nor that they were part of Jesus' instruction about discipleship and how to save our lives.

Mark situated his account of Jesus foreshadowing his own death on that cross in a dramatic narrative context. As we hear these words we recall Jesus had given a question to his followers—now as well as then: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter's model response was based on Jesus' dramatic healings, perplexing parables, incredible miracles, and shocking inclusion that could only be seen as the characteristic activities of an appealing messiah. Jesus the scandal becomes Jesus the caring helper, the wise teacher, the opener of new possibilities, and the one who welcomed all. So we too are to be caring and discerning, welcoming the new and being hospitable to all, and we are okay with that reality.

The model "confession of faith" has a disturbing sequel, however. Jesus began to teach his followers that he would be rejected, would suffer greatly, and would be killed. Peter's response indicated clearly that this new teaching did not come as "good news." It even seemed that rising from death after three days would not be adequate compensation for the horrors that precede it. We can only imagine how Jesus' subsequent teaching was received: followers must also take up the cross, must lose themselves for the sake of the gospel, and must be prepared to die.

It is easy for us to skip over Peter's shock and revulsion at the prospect of a suffering and dying messiah. We know the end of the story—the triumph of resurrection glory, heavenly ascension, lavish gifts of the Spirit, and a life of discipleship that rarely entails loss of life. **Joseph D. Small**

But back to our scripture... Peter had just proclaimed his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, to which Jesus had replied that they must reveal this to no one. Our

present text makes clear the reason for this commanded silence. Jesus had much to teach them about what he must face: betrayal, denial, suffering, death, and finally, and most mysteriously, resurrection. The stakes were rising. There was suddenly more to being his disciple than watching him heal and hearing him teach. Having told them "plainly" about his cross, he told both the intimate disciples and the larger multitudes that if they wanted to be his disciples they were going to have to take up *their own crosses* and follow him, strangely enough losing their lives in order to gain them.

Anyone who wants to become a follower (that is, disciple) of Jesus—not just the original Twelve—must first deny himself or herself and take up the cross. Potential followers must be ready and willing to suffer as Jesus suffered, losing their lives in order to gain them.

Such teachings had immediate relevance for Mark's community, which was probably a persecuted community. For them the message was clear: the way to salvation (the way to save their lives) is through faithful endurance of persecution, not avoidance of it. Yet "denying oneself" has significance even for communities not undergoing active persecution. At its most basic level it means removing oneself from the center of one's concerns, relinquishing status and power in favor of service to others. Those who deny themselves in this way will also receive an eternal reward (9:35; 10:43).

So who are our models for understanding how to live in order to save our lives: the self-denying widow who gave her last coins (12:41-44); Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross (15:21); the woman who anointed him for burial (14:3-9); blind Bartimaeus, who received his sight and followed Jesus on the way to Jerusalem and the destiny that awaited there (10:46-52). The disciples do not serve as models as they did not obtain understanding until after the resurrection! "Suffering, rejection, and death are not on the agenda. Prestige, power, and dominion *are* the agenda. It

was David's throne they were after, ruling the nations with power and might. We signed on for a crown, not a cross!"

Why is it that every Christian sanctuary has his cross at the focal point, while our own crosses are nowhere symbolized? The collective witness of the New Testament regards the cross as the visible symbol of the saving journey of Jesus. We are right to celebrate that journey and the Good News that it is both to and for us. But this witness was already worked out in the epistles long before Mark took up the pen. By then the original disciples of Jesus had become apostles, the guardians of the memory of the journey of Jesus, and the creators of the institutions that would guard and further interpret the meaning of it. Well and good. But Mark put this teaching moment of Jesus with his *disciples* and with those who desired to become his *disciples* at the center of his Gospel. In doing so, he reminds us that the first call Jesus made to others was not to be apostles or to be ordained or even to be members in the church, but simply be his disciples, taking responsibility for going on their own journeys of faith with the living God, just as he was doing in his own way.

The church that rightly lifts high the cross of Christ all too often neglects the narrative of faith articulated in Jesus' teaching: that discipleship involves giving up our own lives through sacrificial love, leading to the surprising and ultimately saving discovery that in giving we have received. We know this, of course. We preach it on occasion, and sometimes even live it out, too. Frequently the final words of worship—our benedictions to the congregation—are exhortations to go forth to love and serve God. But the absence of permanent symbols of Jesus' call to take up our own crosses, to be his disciples, to save our lives, by taking full responsibility for going ourselves on the sacrificial journey that Jesus pioneered, perhaps helps to explain why churches become preoccupied with membership and not with discipleship. Perhaps what we need is a multitude of crosses, one for each

of us, at the back door of our sanctuaries, to be taken up as we return to the world of home and family, work and commerce, service and play—symbols of the call to discipleship and to save our lives that we have heard and accept anew.

The season of Lent, structured as it is to remember in its fullness the journey of Jesus to the cross, is also the perfect time for articulating the call of Jesus to discipleship. In these forty days we may contemplate not only the wonderful power of the cross of Christ, but the power inherent in taking up our own crosses too. Opportunities are daily before us, times when we may give our lives sacrificially to acts of love, compassion, justice, and peace, even in the face of the same imperial forces of sin and death that confronted Jesus. In this season, we are wise to ponder, not only the cross or crucifix in our sanctuaries, but the picture of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, calling all his disciples to take up our own crosses and to walk with him in paths of love and service. **Paul C. Shupe, Jouette M. Bassler, and W. Hulitt Gloer**

Everyone who would be his disciple then and now, must "deny" self. If we will save our lives, we must be willing to give up our agendas to serve and follow Jesus!

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