

September 12th, 2021

Mark 8:27-38 “Another Little Word About Wisdom”

Jesus is one of those historical figures who often gets quoted by people who aren't particularly religious. There are a lot of “Jesus sayings” that have taken on a life of their own in our common speech - probably because they're wise and applicable to everyday situations. Think about some of these sayings: “turn the other cheek”; “do unto others”; “casting your pearls before swine”; “hiding your light under a bushel”; “O ye of little faith”; “render unto Caesar”; “the salt of the earth”; “don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing”; “going the extra mile”; “building your house on sand”; “a wolf in sheep's clothing.” These are memorable sayings because Jesus had a talent for using vivid images that take root in people's minds and then out of nowhere they come up again. For example: You're driving to an event where you don't have much wiggle-room time-wise. You've barely got enough time to get there, but you realize you left your phone on the nightstand at home. That means you don't have Siri or Google Maps to help you navigate to your destination. Then the passenger in your car who also does not have a phone for whatever reason says, “We're not going to make it on time! You don't even know where you're going!” And you say – “O ye of little faith.” I was waiting for someone to say, “Get thee behind me Satan.” Thank you for not going there, although I would have accepted that as a valid answer since Jesus did say this in verse 33. “O ye of little faith” was indeed what I had in mind. That's a Jesus quote, but not everyone knows it. When it comes to some of our little wisdom sayings, we don't always think about the source of the quote. You say it because it's just another little word of wisdom that you heard from someone else who heard it from someone else and so on. What's troublesome is when these wise little quotes are used outside their original context.

Our scripture for today contains a classic example of a Jesus quote that is often used out of context. How many times do you hear people talking about “the cross they must bear?” Here in verse 34 Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up

their cross and follow me.” But this idea of “bearing your cross” has sort of taken on a life of its own. You’ll hear people using it for everything – allergies, rashes, pimples, difficult family members, a harsh work environment, arthritis, marriage breakdowns, unemployment, broken legs, mortgage payments. The list is endless. This phrase has come to mean that you have to learn to live with the things that life throws at you ... that make things harder than they might otherwise be. So keep a stiff upper lip and get on with your life as best you can. The old Greek word “stoicism” captures this idea. Don’t let these things get you down. Buck up little camper and just keep making lemonade out of lemons.

Now there is no question that bad things *do* happen to good people. If you’ve come to this church for any length of time, you know how much I like the Book of Job in the Old Testament because it addresses this very issue. As I’ve said before, the book of Job can be summed up in two words – “Stuff happens.” Let me be clear that this, “Bear my cross” wisdom does NOT apply to situations like domestic violence or anything that puts your life at risk. You most certainly do NOT have to put up with that. But either way, if we read some kind of “put up or shut up” idea into what Jesus was saying in *this* passage, we’re going to miss the point. In this context Jesus was talking about what it means to be his followers, and so “take up your cross and follow me” was specifically addressing *our* willingness to face the consequences of following Jesus.

Arthritis is not a consequence of following Jesus. I’m not sure what it is a consequence of — maybe your genetic coding — but if you’ve got it, you’ll have to live with it as best you can whether you follow Jesus or not. Mortgage payments are not a consequence of following Jesus. They are a consequence of choosing to purchase your own house. If you make that choice you will have to bear the burden of paying the mortgage whether you follow Jesus or not. Unemployment is not *usually* a consequence of following Jesus. It’s a consequence of living somewhere that has more people than jobs. And unless you live in a society that allows religious discrimination in the workplace, the decision to follow Jesus won’t (or at least shouldn’t) have an impact on your employment.

These sorts of things are facts of life for everyone, not just those who choose to follow Jesus. They are the price of being human, not being a Christian. This is not meant to, in any way, downplay the impact that such things have on people. It's simply to say that such difficulties and tragedies affect *everyone*, not just Christians. They are real and important, but they're not what Jesus was talking about here. So, what *was* he talking about?

For Jesus, taking up his cross literally meant his willingness to die for what he was committed to. When he arrived in Jerusalem, the religious and national leaders gave him a simple choice — You either back down or we will have you killed. Jesus either had to walk away from the things he had been saying and doing — to stop rocking the boat — or he had to hold his ground and pay the ultimate price for it. He had just explained this to his disciples when he followed it up with, “those who want to be my followers must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” He's saying that if you choose to take your stand with him, you have to be willing to deal with the consequences. You can't choose to follow Jesus and keep your head down. When Jesus walks out into the open to protest about the way things are, you can either look on from a distance or you can follow him. And when Jesus says that if you want to be his follower you've got to “deny yourself,” he's saying that you have to hand over the keys. You don't tag along at a distance and pick and choose about when you are going to be associated with Jesus and when you're not. Denying yourself means relinquishing the right to determine which issues you'll stand with Jesus on and which issues you'll keep quiet about. Denying yourself means that every time the way of Jesus comes into conflict with the ways of the world around you, you will not make the decision based on what is best for *you*. You will simply follow Jesus, taking up your cross and dealing with the consequences.

And ... if there's any doubt about what Jesus was really saying ... he lays it out at the end of this passage. “Listen, if you're too embarrassed to be associated with me when my ways are despised or ridiculed by those around you ... don't expect me to welcome you with open arms when it's

convenient to you.” This is similar to some of the examples we were rejecting before, because some of them are consequences of choices. If you choose not to continue making your mortgage payments, don’t expect the bank to keep recognizing you as the owner of the house. You can’t have the benefits of the arrangement — the house — without the costs. It’s a whole package. You make the choice, you deal with the consequences. All of them.

Now, understand that the consequences of following Jesus aren’t going to be the same for everyone. During certain times and places in history following Jesus has carried the death penalty. In these times and places, taking up your cross has literally meant signing your own death warrant. Here and now, Christianity is not likely to become illegal in the foreseeable future, but it’s also not likely to become the way *most* people *choose* to live. If you choose to follow Jesus, you have to accept that it’s not going to endear you to a lot of the people you have to deal with. The closer you follow Jesus, the more consequences you’ll discover. And each time a new consequence comes along, the more you’ll discover times when it’s either follow Jesus or give up following Jesus completely. I guess there *is* a third option — you could sort of “play” at being a Christian, but it seems like what Jesus is saying here is that this option is really just a disguised version of giving up and not following Jesus.

Okay, so what’s the good news, Jesse? We’ve heard that you get kind of cranky when you don’t feel good, but it sounds kind of like you’re just beating up on us. Here’s the good news - Jesus *does* include the promise of resurrection here. He tells Peter, “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days ... *rise again*.”

And that promise of resurrection contains promise for all those other things we’ve mistaken as “crosses.” For those who struggle with sickness and pain, there is the promise of a day when all will be healed and whole. For those struggling with conflict and breakdown, there is

the promise of a day of reconciliation and communion. For those who are exploited or discarded, there is the promise of a day of justice. They may not be crosses, but Jesus takes them seriously and longs to bring us freedom and wholeness. The promise is awesome, but the road between here and there is travelled by those who are willing to accept the consequences that await along the way — those who are willing to take up their crosses and follow.