

“THE CRITERIA OF DISCIPLESHIP”

Mark 8:31-38

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

In the first episode of Jesus calling his disciples, he is passing along the Sea of Galilee. There are Simon and Andrew, casting their fishing nets, as well as James and John mending theirs. Jesus calls out to them: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And, though these fishermen hardly know Jesus (at best they’d heard a few of his sermons, and knew of his friendship with the very famous John the Baptist), they still do a very fascinating thing. They immediately leave their nets and follow. James and John even walk out on the family business without giving notice, and even without giving their father Zebedee so much as a goodbye hug. For see what adventures await them! Now they could leave this backwater town, travel with this one who speaks with authority, and—who knows?—improve their own situation...maybe gain some of their own followers.

Even though by the end of Mark’s Gospel, one is left with the deep impression that the disciples are a few clowns short of a circus, you have to admire their willingness to continue following Jesus after their first day on the job. For immediately after Jesus calls them, they go into a local synagogue in Capernaum, right there on the coast, where Jesus starts teaching. Everyone is amazed at his eloquence, until a congregation member lashes out at him, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come here to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy one of God.” But Jesus says, “Be silent! Come out of him!” And as the exorcism proceeds, the possessed man is convulsing and screaming—just an awful scene, the mother of all church interruptions. If the reaction to my first sermon had been that someone began yelling at me and foaming at the mouth, I think I might have taken a year off. Find a different subject. But no, though it’s their first day of ministry, the disciples stay committed.

And because they stay, they are made witnesses to a spectacular series of extraordinary events: Jesus making a man’s leprosy vanish before their eyes; men digging through the roof of a house to let down their paralytic friend into Jesus’ healing presence; Jesus’ preaching parables that left them fascinated, puzzled, shocked, and wanting more; Jesus turning the contents of a few Thomas the Train lunch boxes into a hearty meal for thousands and thousands of people. There was that one time Jesus controlled the weather. Not to forget his raising from death the daughter of a synagogue leader. The disciples must be thinking at this point that leaving their day jobs was the best decision they’d ever made.

Until today. In *this* new revelation, Jesus amplifies the original call like a sergeant telling his unit that, yes, boot camp was indeed difficult, but you haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen combat. Jesus gives not only his disciples, but also the entire crowd, a sobering glimpse of what lies ahead for anyone who follows him. “Is anyone still interested in following me? Then yourselves and take up your cross...and follow me.” Where the original release-form the disciples signed simply said, “Follow me.” The new version has criteria added to it: “Deny yourselves and take up your cross.” Will we sign up for this?

Jesus tells a parable. There was a sower who went out to sow. He was a rather lousy sower, throwing seed at random. Some landed on good soil, and produced 30 and 60 and 100-fold. But some seed landed on the path and was snatched up by the birds. Other seed fell among thorns and was choked by the thorns. And still more seed fell on rocky ground, where it established roots—shallow roots. And when the sun came up, it was scorched.

Over time, we can lose the sense of just how astonishing Jesus' declaration is. Every Jew steeped in Scripture and tradition expected the Messiah would work wonders, restore their fortunes, send the oppressors fleeing, and reestablish the throne of David. They'd become used to seeing people crucified by the Romans out beyond the city walls. Rome was very savvy about this. Rome wanted those under occupation to know, if you mess with Rome, this will be your fate. "Yes, *your* fate!" the disciples thought. "But *not* the Messiah's." The disciples were so certain of this that Peter quite confidently strides forth to rebuke Jesus. But Jesus counter-rebuked, "Get behind me, Satan."

This week we said goodbye to a Baptist saint, our brother, friend, and neighbor, The Reverend Billy Graham, whose preaching I remember watching on television as a child sitting at my grandmother's feet. I remember his boldness, his movie star profile, his simple message. No one in human history to this point has addressed more people with the gospel of forgiveness than Billy Graham. Millions of people, from young to old, from the timid to the brave, from law-abiding citizens to death-row inmates became disciples of Jesus by his preaching. He knew what was at stake. In a passage of his writing, as he recounted the last words of many saints, Graham gestured toward what his own last words might be, saying, "I'm not afraid to die, for I know the joys of heaven are waiting."¹

Graham and so many other saints died old and full of years, while Jesus and his disciples died young. The endings come differently for all of us. Jesus is not asking us to seek death, to chase death, but to become disciples with the understanding that this new life is going to be so laden with dangers, toils and snares that it's impossible to live it without a suit of armor. Paul offers us a description of this suit. We put on a belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, a helmet of salvation, suitable shoes for preaching peace, a sword of truth, which is the Word of God.

In a recent conversation with David Letterman, John Lewis, US Congressman and Civil Rights Leader, told of how, when he was only 25 years old, he helped lead the first march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The march ended in his hospitalization along with 49 others. A State Trooper had been beaten him into the ground with a baton. Here is how he describes his "suit of armor."

Lewis said, "That day I was wearing a light trench coat, a backpack. In the backpack I had an apple, an orange, toothpaste and toothbrush, and two books. I thought we would be arrested and go to jail."

Letterman said, "You said you 'saw death.' What does that feel like?"

Lewis said, "I thought I was going to die. There was something—some force—that was just pushing us on. Sometimes you have to be inspired and lifted up by what I call the 'Spirit of History.'"

¹ Billy Graham, *The Enduring Classics of Billy Graham: The Secret of Happiness; Hope for the Troubled Heart; Death and the Life After* (Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2004) see Ch. 12, "Before I Die."

Letterman said, “Yeah, I tell you, being here with you is inspiring.”

Lewis went on, “We had been taught not to be afraid, to be determined, to be orderly and peaceful, and to abide by the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence.”

Letterman responded, “But can you teach not to be afraid? I mean, pretending to not be afraid is as good as actually not being afraid, isn’t it?”

Lewis said, “Well...it is.”²

But we have to learn how to suit up, how to fasten the belt of truth, and the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, the shoes for preaching peace, the sword of truth. We practice and put each layer on, one by one. It may start simply, by pouring ourselves out in a simple way, for others. It may be in the teaching of a Sunday School Class, or serving in the Lunch at the Crossroads, or in the Children After School Program, or in the local prison.

It may be as simple as keeping a friend through thick and thin, pouring ourselves out here, there, little by little. It may start out as the absorption of a vicious insult, pouring ourselves out in grace, absorbing that violence, and keeping on going.

But this is what Jesus does in the end. He’s pierced with a spear, and he literally pours himself out. Every time we gather for communion, I take the bread and break it. I take the wine, pour it in the cup, for us.

But now in this self-denial. Now in this taking up of our cross, we become the cup. We are the vessels, who pour out ourselves, little by little, but eventually, our whole selves. We know that we’ve signed on to this new contract, the advanced version of the original, when we find ourselves praying this prayer Jesus prayed: “Lord, let this cup pass from me. I know this is going to lead to suffering. Lord, let this cup pass from me! Yet not my will, but yours be done.”

See what great adventures await us all? Amen.

² David Letterman, *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction: Barack Obama, feat. John Lewis* (Netflix, 2018) conversation begins at 26:00 min. mark.

