

Putting Our Name on it and Feeling the Cost

Mark 8: 31-37

Then he began to teach them that 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

There's a children's book named *Gossie and Gertie*. Gossie and Gertie are a couple of goslings. Gossie leads and Gertie follows. Gossie says, "Follow me!" and Gertie follows for a bit: into the barn they go. "Follow me," Gossie says again and Gertie follows to visit the animals. Then Gossie jumps into a mud puddle, "Follow me!" she says. But this time Gertie does not follow. "Follow me!" says Gossie again. But Gertie is too busy chasing a frog or a butterfly or is wildly distracted by a shiny blue beetle crawling on the ground. Frustrated, Gossie shouts to Gertie, "Follow me!" Except, Gertie has found a trail of crumbs. "It's dinnertime," Gertie says, "You follow me!" And of course, Gossie—the once leader—follows Gertie to a mound of tasty grain. It's a parable about what can happen to our faith without the cross. No mud puddles, just prosperity. Yet, after Jesus is named the Messiah, we hear Jesus calling the church to its mission as he heads to the mud puddle, "Follow me!" But the church does not want to follow.

As we start, we admit proclaiming Jesus as Messiah is a lot easier than following him. Believing in him is one thing, picking up the cross is another. Most of us have stood over the waters of our baptism pledging our allegiance to Christ above everything else. We have vowed that we are willing to be a people who turn away from the demonic powers of our world. We have signed our name on God's constitution of loving our neighbor as ourselves. But our life as Christians gets tangled up in the system of self-interest. America is a self-proclaimed Christian nation. But the gospel of freedom rings false in a system which incarcerates more human beings per capita than anywhere else in the world. In a system of self-interest, we have asked Jesus to follow us, convincing ourselves Jesus was a good capitalist, even though he is always preaching about God's economy—where workers all get the same paycheck. And what has happened to the gospel of the last becoming first and the losers being lifted up as winners? It gets subverted by an unapologetic, "America First, winners only" mentality. After confessing Jesus is Lord, after renouncing evil's lure and death's tentacles at our baptism, after saying our lives belong to God, how has this happened? We know the answer: we are all stuck in the system's web of self-interest. It is a lot easier to proclaim Jesus with our words and sing about him in our songs, than it is to deny ourselves, pick up the cross and follow.

So we can empathize with Peter, bless his heart. Peter. He pulls Jesus aside to talk some sense into him. After all, it is what good friends do. "That's not the Messiah's job! You need to take care of yourself if you are going to take care of other!" But Jesus sees the weather report ahead. His eyes are fixed on the storm he sees headed straight toward him, and he's not budging. "Get behind me, Satan!" We have

heard a lot this week about people relocating from the coast. People packing suitcases, grabbing photo albums from basements, driving westbound down I-40 to avoid the catastrophe. But some have decided to hunker down and ride the storm out. Now I'm not sure about you, but my instincts tell me that rolling the dice when it comes to a hurricane is NOT the best idea—and some have tragically died as a result. We hear their friends saying, "We tried to talk them into coming with us, but they weren't budging." It's what friends do. We try to help people avoid suffering, avoid the catastrophes. Peter pulls Jesus aside, tries to talk sense into his friend. But Jesus isn't budging. Instead he snaps, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Perhaps it is because Jesus knows there is always a cost. Whether we choose to do something for the sake of the gospel, or choose not to do something to protect ourselves, we will feel the cost. Recently, a friend filled out a survey for our local school board. In the survey she asked the board to consider reintegrating our schools once again. In the comment section she wrote about all the studies which show how it will boost up the bottom. There won't be so many empty black schools on the east side, or overcrowded white schools on the west. She filled out the survey, made her case, but then it asked her for her name. That's when she realized that *her children* might have to do this and if she signs her name to it, then she is committed. She's feeling the cost. If we believe following Jesus means we sign our name to things that could be considered risky, there will be a cost. We might lose sleep. We might lose beloved members. We might lose sleep over losing beloved members. We will feel the cost for our actions.

But now flip it around. Consider the alternative. If we decide not to do anything that ruffles feathers. If we believe following Jesus means keeping peace among ourselves and avoiding risks, well, isn't there a cost to that as well? The church can become shamefully silent on issues that matter. We can become stagnant silos of compliancy. We could end up as a church where the gospel loses its relevancy and the church while trying to save itself can lose its Spirited life. Did you know Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Winston Salem? In the entire Piedmont area—Greensboro, High Point, and Winston—there was only one church that allowed him to speak: Goler Memorial AME Zion church on Patterson Ave. No other church wanted to take the risk and open their pulpit to the civil rights preacher. There is a cost to everything. We will feel it if we do. We will feel it if we don't.

Except, here's the good news! Do you remember what else Jesus says? Take another look: "The Son of Man will be rejected and suffer and be killed and...*on the third day rise again*. How many of us missed the resurrection part? The promise gets tucked away under a blanket of fear. The good news gets lost in the cross-talk. We lose sight that rejection might come, but our identity as the church will ring true. We forget that suffering might come, but the strength of our love penetrates and persists. We forget that the cross might come, but there is always resurrection's promise on the other side. Mistakes, they are a given. Fear, we will need to work through it. Resistance, we can expect it. But God will use it all for God's glory. The only thing God won't be able to use is the thing we are too afraid to try.

Ran into your old pastor, Stewart, a few weeks back and he shared with me a story. It was around the time the church was coming out to the world as open and affirming. He had written a few letters to the editor in the newspaper, put his name on it—and by association your name. Created a storm of counter-resisters and rejecters. The church office phone rang with word daggers and threats. So Stewart became very nervous when afternoon he found a suspicious looking package waiting for him in the church's mailbox. It was a small box, but he wasn't expecting a package. His nerves became really on edge when he shook the box and it rattled. So he called the police worried that inside there could be a small

explosive meant to harm him. The squad car showed up with the K-9 unit. The dog began sniffing around the package. The police officer took out his Swiss army knife, carefully cutting the tape around it. He opened the box slowly to reveal that inside the box was a cassette tape of a sermon a friend mailed to him. In the midst of feeling the cost, Stewart had forgotten the package was coming. And yet, here we are twenty-five years later on the other side of the risk. No bombs, only blessings. We forget about the second half of Jesus' words, don't we? There will be suffering, rejection and a cross" Jesus says, "*and on the third day I will rise again.*"

When Jesus tells his disciples to pick up the cross and follow, he is speaking about the mission of the church. He's asking us, "What is the church willing to give its life for today? What is the church willing to put its name on for the sake of the gospel?" We're putting our name on a few things these days and at some point we might start to feel it—there's always a cost. And there is always a blessing. Don't forget about the blessing! Don't forget that the only thing God won't be able to use, is the thing we are too afraid to try. Amen.