

“I Will, With God’s Help”

Mark 8:31-38

February 28, 2021

Second Sunday of Lent

Pastor Andy Kinsey

Third in Series on Listening to God

*“And then Jesus began to teach the disciples
that the Son of Man must undergo suffering and be rejected...”*

- Mark 8:31

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, help us to listen to your voice and to understand what you are teaching us, about yourself and about the way you would have us to follow you. In Christ’s name, we pray: Amen.

Message

If you have ever been to an ordination service at Annual Conference, you know that it is one of the highlights of the whole experience. All the business comes down to sharing in a moment when we all recognize and, hopefully, realize our dependence on God and our calling to be faithful followers of Christ, regardless of whether we are ordained or not.

All the years of preparation, all the devotion, and all the “work” – come down to a service of celebration where we set aside people to lead in the life of the church.

As I recall, when I was ordained, in 1992, I knelt before Bishop Leroy Hodapp. Peggy and I then went to Terre Haute to serve. Little could we comprehend at the time what the journey would entail! *When you say “yes” to follow Christ, you never know what is in store!* After all, how could I understand at age twenty-five where I would go, and what I see, and whom I would encounter? *I/we would need God’s help!*

In fact, when people move through the ordination process, at least in The United Methodist Church, they quickly understand how true that is! As part of the

examination process, we learn early on to depend on God's grace – from the beginning when we accept the call to the end when the bishop lays on hands us – and honestly, that is only the start! Indeed, the questions we answer as part of the ordination service speak to the kind of dependence, strength, and guidance on God we all will need.

When the bishop asks you, for example, “Will you be faithful in prayer, in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, continually rekindle the gift of God that is in you?”¹ The expected answer is, “I will, with God's help”; and when the bishop, who represents the whole church, asks you, “Will you be a steadfast disciple of Christ, so that your life may be fashioned by the gospel, and provide a faithful example for all God's people?”² The expected answer is, “I will, with God's help.”

The time of questioning then ends with the bishop praying, “May God, who has given you the will to do these things, give you the grace to perform them that the work begun in you may be brought to perfection. Amen.”³

Note the focus: the work we are to carry out is *God's* work, grounded in Christ. The emphasis is on what *God* generates and on what *God* completes; it all begins and ends with *God* (Phil. 1:9).

If that sounds like the proverbial “Well, duh, of course,” we might do well to understand that even with God's help, many who confess those words at ordination end up leaving ministry. Not necessarily as a sign of unfaithfulness, but rather, sometimes, because it is just difficult, a reminder that all we do as Christians *is* dependent on God. We cannot “walk as Jesus walked” without God's help!

Peter's Response

And if we think we can do it without God's help, well, we might want to revisit Peter's response in our passage today, because if Peter thought he could follow Jesus without God's help, or without God revealing to him who Jesus was, he was sadly mistaken (Mk. 8:31-38).

Indeed, I do not know what people expect when they commit to following Jesus, but one thing is for sure: if you truly *listen* to what Jesus says about what *he*

¹ *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: UM Publishing House, 1989), 676.

² *Ibid.*, 676.

³ *Ibid.*, 676.

is going to do, you can expect that there is going to be a *cross* to bear at some point (Mk. 8:35). I am not sure why some Christians seem to skip over this: Jesus, cross, discipleship. It seems straightforward, and yet, at least in this passage, it isn't, for what Peter has in mind about following the Messiah is not quite the same as what Jesus has in mind. Peter and Jesus seem to be saying the same word "Messiah," but they understand that word very differently (Mk. 8:35-38).

In fact, as we read a moment ago, just following Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi (Mk. 8:29), there *is* Jesus' attempt to clarify what that confession entails, where Jesus says, "The Son of Man must undergo suffering and be rejected...be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mk. 8:31).

Such a picture for the *Messiah* is *not* on Peter's radar. It is not the image in Peter's head, which is not exactly wrong by the way! There is in Israel the tradition that when the Messiah would come, he would liberate the people and do so as a military leader, or as one of God's anointed.⁴ The claim was that when the Messiah would come, suffering would cease and so would oppression, in this case, Roman rule.⁵

In our text today, Jesus appears to be saying the *opposite*. Jesus seems to be saying that when the Messiah comes, *he* is going to suffer and die, and that anyone who stands in the way might as well take the side of Satan (Mk. 8:33). It is as if Peter has been watching one news channel and switches to another because he does not like the information he is receiving: Jesus is saying one thing, but Peter does not want to hear it. And that's a problem: the problem is that *what* Jesus is teaching gets to the heart of what the Christian faith is about: change this point and we change the faith.

But in Peter's defense, there is more to consider. One commentator of this passage, for example, writes that when Jesus says that he is going to suffer and die, he might well have been the captain of a football team telling his teammates that he wanted to let the opposition score ten goals right off the bat! It is as if Jesus is inviting them to come and lose!⁶

⁴ Malcom McLaurin, "I Will, With God's Help," *Living Well through Lent* (Scott Stoner: Living Compass Press, 2021), 27; cf., N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 111.

⁵ Thanks to Fred B. Craddock for this insight about the nature of Messiahship in both Christian and Jewish teaching.

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 111.

It reminds me of the Charlie Brown cartoon where Schroder tells Charlie Brown after a bad game: “Charlie Brown, winning isn’t everything,” but Charlie Brown says, “But losing isn’t anything!”⁷ Get the picture!

That is the heart of what is happening here: in Peter’s mind, this is what a “false” Messiah would do – i.e., suffer and die – not a “true” Messiah.⁸

Listening to Jesus

It is why Peter is shocked, and it is why he rebukes Jesus (Mk. 8:32). Whereupon Jesus rebukes Peter and gets upset too! That is to say, not only does Jesus tell Peter that Peter can’t see straight and that he has his mind in other places (Mk. 8:33); but he tells *everyone* who wants to follow him what they can expect when they do – to pick up and carry a cross (Mk. 8:35). That if people truly want to follow Jesus, they will need to *listen* to him, and they will need to see that something new is taking place: *redemption is coming, not through violence, but through loving-sacrifice on a cross* (Mk. 10:45).

Nothing is going to be out of reach of Jesus’ sacrificial love – pain, injustice, suffering, persecution; nothing outside of his outstretched arms, as all are within the scope of God’s mercy.

And I wonder if this is what unsettles Peter: an image of God that takes on human weakness as a way to confront sin, take it away, forgive it, and redeem it (Jn. 1:29). Not what Peter has in mind!

But Peter is also not only one who does not get this. Indeed, I am not sure we even get it today. In fact, it was Albert Schweitzer, the great missionary and biblical scholar who said that all our modern attempts to find “the historical Jesus” just end up looking like the people who are doing the searching!⁹

In other words, too many times we are too quick to have a picture of Jesus that doesn’t fit with the picture in the Gospels, which can often become unfaithful to his identity and mission.

And I wonder if this is what happens *when we fail to listen fully* to what the Gospels are saying – that like Peter, we seem to want to put Jesus into our framework. We do not want to believe that his mission of suffering and love does not conform to our preconceived ideas.

⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁹ See his famous book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (New York, NY: MacMillan Press, 1961).

Think about it: we all have ways of trying to tame Jesus, of trying to keep Jesus at bay; and what the New Testament tries to teach us is that we can't! Just when we think we can capture Jesus, he moves and slips through a crowd; he touches and cleanses a leper, and he heals the sick. Or, just when we think we can tie him down to our agendas, he keeps bursting them apart; that when we think history is going one way, Jesus goes another!

Hence, the risk of following him! Hence, the need to recognize that you cannot do "discipleship" alone! If you are going to follow Jesus, if you are going to commit to him, *you are going to need God's help! Repeat: you are going to need God's help!*

The good news is that in recognizing this, in confessing this, you are going to receive all the help you will need! There is always going to be enough to help you follow – more than enough! Just as he said, "Ask and you shall receive."

That's good news! Ask and you shall receive!

To those who have ears to hear, let them hear!

Amen.