

**“Lent in Plain Sight: Cross”**

**Mark 8:31-38**

**Second Week in Lent**

**March 13, 2022**

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*“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.”*

**Mark 8:34**

**Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, help us to rest in the saving power of Christ’s cross, that we may follow you and share in the glory of your sacrificial love. Amen.

**Message**

If you have ever been to London, you are probably familiar with the “Tube,” the expansive underground transport system, with miles and miles of tunnels. You are also likely to know the familiar refrain over loudspeakers and signs when you board the Tube, which says, “Mind the Gap.” The words are tied to London’s ethos, so much so that you can now see this phrase on t-shirts and other merchandise.

Of course, the “gap” we are to mind is the gap between the train and the platform. If we don’t mind that gap, it is possible to fall through it!

After traveling the Tube several times, I can say this with some confidence! When it says, “Mind the gap,” you need to mind the gap! Unlike the trains in Germany which do not have such large gaps, the trains in England seem to have larger distances between the train and platform. Therefore, mind the gap!

Once upon a time, when I was in seminary, someone else once told me to mind the gap, only it was the gap in which I as the preacher stood in the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other; and in twenty minutes (or less) bring these two worlds together, over the gap of history and culture. Just like that!

After preaching for close to forty years now, I have come to see that this is not very helpful image. I say that because I think it makes a false assumption: it assumes that we modern folks have it altogether on the one hand and folks in the “irrelevant world of the Bible,” with its outdated modes of understanding, cannot possibly teach us anything on the other.

I don’t think this is accurate. Indeed, I think such a view is in keeping with what C.S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery,” or the view that we modern folks speak from a place of superiority. After witnessing recent events, not to mention the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I don’t think we can speak with any sense of superiority.

I know I can’t. I also know I cannot possibly bridge such a gap as a preacher. Instead, I have come to recognize another, more profound gap, a gap which I believe hits closer to home – the gap which the cross of Christ reveals in plain sight: our own idolatry.<sup>1</sup> To be brought into the presence of the Living God is to become aware of this gap or of this distance between God and us, that has very little to do with the two-thousand years of history. Indeed, as our passage today indicates, if the cross doesn’t reveal this gap, or this distance, then it has lost its value to shock us, even to save us.

I say this because I feel we, like most people, have done our best to housebreak God and to keep the cross as smooth as possible, with God on our side of the gap, producing a gospel that goes down like honey, but no longer with salt and light (Mt 5:13-16).<sup>2</sup>

It is an insight that has consequences for our discipleship, of course. In fact, in the early 1970s a new kind of church emerged which did away with the cross in plain sight and ushered in a whole “user friendly” and “seeker sensitive” approach to church. In the 1970s, as suburbs began to pop up, churches began to look more like shopping malls. It was not an accident. The idea was to gut the church of sacred objects so as to make the church more comfortable for the “unchurched.”

After 50 years, the results of this project are mixed at best. Even by the seeker churches’ own admission, the growth of the church in this way did not produce committed followers but more, religious consumers.<sup>3</sup> One observer of this

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *William Willimon’s Lectionary Sermon Resource* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 182.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>3</sup> Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *REVEAL Study* (Burlington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007).

phenomenon even noted that “taking out the symbol of the cross in worship” soon translated to “no one carrying their cross in discipleship.”<sup>4</sup>

But it is a problem endemic to American Protestantism. We heard a similar refrain in other parts of the church in the 1960s. Reuel Howel, a sociologist, interviewed lay people and asked them about preaching. Most of the people he spoke with complained that sermons were too long on analysis of problems and too short on solutions, as if the preacher was akin to a therapist. In less than twenty minutes, the preacher was to resolve conflict, provide inner peace, answer life’s most profound questions, and offer a menu of happiness, to go along, of course, with the “happy clappy” music. A total consumer package mind you!<sup>5</sup>

But it is an impossible task to preach in this vein, as it fails Christ from the get-go. The reason it fails Christ is because before the gospel is an answer, it is a question; before it is a solution, it is a provocation. Before the gospel offers anything, it is a call to realize that we are not the center of life – Jesus is.<sup>6</sup> In other words, if you want to come and live in the presence of this Jew from Nazareth, then you might want to ask the question of who you are in relation to him: do you even want to relate to him?

Because if you do, you will want to ask the questions Pastor Jenothy was asking last week, How are you going to live differently, give differently, worship differently, love differently when you decide to follow Jesus?<sup>7</sup>

In addition, what if Jesus doesn’t measure “success” or “happiness” the way you do? In fact, what if Jesus is more concerned with *increasing the distance between who he is and who you think he is*, and not with closing it? What do you with that?<sup>8</sup> I ask because if we are seeing “the cross in plain sight,” then we need to listen to what Jesus says about who he is, and that there is often a distance between him and us.<sup>9</sup>

## **Jesus in Mark’s Gospel**

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<sup>4</sup> Rodney Clapp, *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 138-139.

<sup>5</sup> Reuel Howe, *Partners in Preaching* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1967), 25-30.

<sup>6</sup> William Willmon’s *Lectionary Sermon Resource*, 183.

<sup>7</sup> See Jenothy Irvine’s sermon “Lent in Plain Sight: Bread” at [www.franklingrace.org](http://www.franklingrace.org).

<sup>8</sup> William Willmon’s *Lectionary Sermon Resource*, 183.

<sup>9</sup> Jill J. Duffield, *Lent in Plain Sight* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2020), 44.

But let's put this difficult passage into context. In this text, the disciples have been with Jesus for some time, and they think they have gotten to know him well. In fact, Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of Israel (Mk 8:22). They all think they know who he is until he begins his seminar on death and dying when he tells them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected and killed (8:33).

It is quite a revelation. No one moves or says a word, until Peter speaks up, and that's when the seminar becomes more like a shouting match, with Peter taking Jesus aside and urging him to stop talking this way. Such teaching, in Peter's mind, will cause people to stop giving to the church, not to mention have negative thoughts about themselves. People might get depressed too. How can you attract more people if the person you are following is no longer "user friendly"?

But Peter's rebuke leads to Jesus' rebuke. "Satan, get behind me" Jesus says! Not exactly words of endearment! Here are two grown men going at each other. It's a lesson in commitment as Jesus reminds Peter: "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them, but all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them" (8:32-33).

It is all very strange. No doubt the disciples thought that by following Jesus they would save their lives and make their lives better and more fulfilling. Now, these difficult words.

I can't prove this for sure, but after this announcement by Jesus the crowds following him seem to have gotten smaller as the gap between who Jesus is and who people expected him to be got bigger. After all, the cross in Jesus' day was a sign of torture and shame, humiliation, defeat. Not a sign of success! The disciples knew this.

In his book *Not a Fan*, Kyle Idleman makes a similar point when he says that most Christians today are quite content with being a fan of Jesus rather than a follower of Jesus: better to admire Jesus from the sidelines than make the decision to follow him and pick up a cross. Idleman wants us to understand that whenever

we make the cross into a ladder for our own self-promotion or admiration, even to get into heaven, we have missed the point of the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

I truly believe that this is what the apostle Paul means when he says that we “preach Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2) – a notion completely out of sink with pagan culture. It’s Paul’s way of saying that we don’t preach a gospel of easy answers: rather, we preach a gospel that keeps coming back to the cross: to the distance Jesus keeps, so that God can keep the throne of grace free, untamed, uncontrollable by the likes of us! It also keeps the gospel interesting.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, I can’t think of anything more dishonest than preaching “cheap love.” By minding what is in plain sight, we realize the gap between God and us, the gap we call the cross.

### **Closing Words**

But we are getting ahead of ourselves: I mean, here we are on the second weekend of Lent, gathered to get close to Jesus, and here I am preaching about a gap God reveals between Jesus and Peter, which is another way of talking about the gap between Jesus and us.<sup>12</sup> After all, you might have come here today to get your life fixed, or maybe you have come to make your life easier, and now you hear Jesus talking about losing our lives and taking up our cross and following him (8:34). It is sobering.

To be sure, in moments like this, we want to affirm that Jesus is God with us and that Jesus has come among us. And yet, and yet, there is still a distance between us. Remember Ash Wednesday? We are dust and to dust we shall return. God the creator, and we the all too human creatures.<sup>13</sup>

The gap exists – and not just between God and us, but between rich and poor, between different racial groups, between political parties, between nations, even among and between Christians, reminding us that we cannot possibly or easily bridge such gaps on our own; and we certainly cannot do so if we try to make Jesus into Someone he is not, as he will always resist our attempts to tame him. Indeed, I don’t see Jesus ever acquiescing to us, for that’s who Jesus is.

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<sup>10</sup> Kyle Idelman, *Not a Fan: Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2016), 26-27.

<sup>11</sup> *William Willimon’s Lectionary Sermon Resource*, 186.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>13</sup> See Pastor Andy’s sermon “Lent in Plain Sight: Dust” on Ash Wednesday at [www.franklingrace.org](http://www.franklingrace.org).

Sometimes he blesses us; sometimes he comforts us, and at other times he rebukes us, as he rebuked Peter.<sup>14</sup>

I believe we need to know this; after all, if we don't want to risk our lives with Jesus, we might want to ask ourselves why we are here. However, if we do understand the risk, then we might want to know that there is always the summons to deny ourselves and pick up our crosses and follow (Mk 8:34).

Just know that we do not do it alone: whatever our cross is – personal pain, illness, addiction, disagreement, confusion, apathy – know that there is One who is with you; there is One whose yoke is easy and whose burden is lite (Mt 11:30).

Therefore, as we mark two years of the pandemic this week, there is a great deal to consider; we have been through a lot; it has not been easy. I know for me it has been two of the toughest, most frustrating and disappointment, years I have experienced in ministry, on top of so many other things.

It is why I cannot help but believe that there is a message in all of this about the cross and the resurrection; there is a message here about faith and hope; and there is a message about One who is always waiting *for us* to confess him as Savior and to decide to follow him as Lord. That there is always a message of grace for us to hear – always – even when there are gaps along the way. Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 186.