

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
September 17, 2006

Mark 8:27-38 **“Who signed me up for this?”**

At noon on the first day of school a principal noticed that a first grader was outside with his backpack on at the bus-loading zone. He went out and asked the boy why he wasn't in class. The child answered that it was time to go home. The principal told him that now that he was in first grade, he would be staying at school all day instead of a half day. The boy then exclaimed, "Who signed me up for this?!"

That may have been exactly how Peter and the disciples felt at this moment in Jesus' ministry as described by the writer of Mark. “Who do people say that I am?” is the question that starts this scene. “But who do you say that I am?” To which Peter replies, “You are the Messiah.”

The Messiah—anointed one...in the first century, Jews interpreted this messiah as one appointed by God to lead the Jewish people in the face of their tribulations with the Romans. In other times and even today, the concept of a Jewish messiah is complicated and not unified or common in all sects of Judaism.

In this particular time of Roman occupation, the expectation was that if God sent a messiah, an anointed one, it would be to lead the Jewish people to a new freedom, likened to the freeing of the Hebrew slaves at the time of Moses. Peter has assumed that Jesus is this kind of Messiah. Jesus tells the disciples to tell no one about him.

Jesus then states clearly that he must go up to Jerusalem and be killed in order to rise again. For Peter, this does not fit his understanding of the Messiah and he pulls Jesus aside to straighten him out. Jesus basically tells Peter to go to you know where. Peter, you don't get it...you're being too human. And then Jesus goes into this world-turned-upside-down aspect of losing your life to save it. Peter wanted Jesus on his terms. Jesus had a different agenda.

“Who signed me up for this?” Like the first grader, we sometimes wonder who signed us up. Unlike the first grader, we do have choices. “Who do you say that I am?” is an important question for us to consider. What kind of a messiah are we expecting? What does it mean to follow Jesus? And what does it mean to take up the cross?

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Jesus wasn't on the cross of illness or the cross of bad choices. Jesus was human, like us. Being human was not his cross. Jesus went to the cross for turning the power structures of his day upside down...eating with anybody and everybody, healing the wrong people at the wrong time and in the wrong locations, confronting those who held power on their behavior or lack of.

The way Jesus lived his life made people pay attention to the way life was lived by others...those who took more than their share, those who looked the other way when people behaved badly, those who made rules that favored the rich and left the poor without.

Jesus confronted the systems that ruled his world and doing so cost him his life. The cross went from being a symbol of execution to a symbol of giving one's life for a purpose larger than one's self. To take up the cross means more than the individual crosses we bear in life, and we all bear them. We are not carrying the cross when we are poor or sick, or suffering the everyday things of life. They are part of life and we all go through them. The cross comes when we try to change things for the better...to make the world a more humane place, to make room at the table for the least and to call for justice. That's how the cross came for Jesus.

As for Peter—he continued to bounce from one verbal extreme to another throughout Jesus' ministry. In spite of this, Peter does not cease to follow. He keeps following Jesus and watching how Jesus lives. Peter gets it when the cross is transformed by Jesus from an instrument of death to an instrument of life.

Week after week, we come here to this place seeking...
seeking hope in times when hope seems lost,
seeking purpose in lives that are broken by bad choices and misplaced trust,
seeking peace in the midst of chaos,
seeking love when love is not found,
seeking fellowship in a world of loneliness,
seeking God the creator of us all.

Week after week, I stand here before you praying that the words I speak be faithful and that in this place we might get a glimpse of what we seek...NO...that we might be overwhelmed by the evidence of what we seek...hope, purpose, peace, love, fellowship and God in it all.

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I believe that God is here with us every week.

I believe that God goes with us from here every week.

Each week some of us get a glimpse and some of us get more.

It's not bad nor good...it just is—much like Peter.

The important part is to keep following...a disciple is simply one who learns.

It's in the following that we learn what it means to deny ourselves in ways that do not negate who we are, but allow us to see beyond our needs to the needs of others.

It's in the following that we learn how to work for change so that the needs of others may be addressed and met.

It's in the following that we learn who we are as our most authentic selves.

It's in the following that we come to bear the cross as we seek to bring about the change that brings justice.

Being a disciple of Jesus requires us to change our perspective. Following Jesus means denying ourselves, rather than having in mind those things that benefit us. When we take up our crosses, we see the world not in flat, two-dimensions, but with the fullness of God's perspective, which helps us to see that the ways to spiritual victory are not of the world.

Not all who follow Jesus and bear the cross are giants or martyrs or people of incredible spiritual strength. Not everyone will be a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or a Martin Luther King, or a Mother Teresa. In fact, most are ordinary people like you and me.

Taking up the cross and following Jesus is never easy. We are confronted every day by the complexities of being human. We want to do what's right and be faithful. Sometimes we do and sometimes we fail. When we fail we pick ourselves up and begin again. It is so much better to follow Jesus in the company of others. When one of us is having a hard time keeping up, others step in to help. When one of us is struggling with the cost of discipleship, others are there to share the struggle.

For me that's the overwhelming evidence that I seek every week...the hope, the purpose, the peace, the love, the fellowship through God, our creator. That's the only way I can take up the cross, by sharing the journey with you.

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The Prayer of St. Francis captures for me an image of what it means to take up the cross. Let's close by praying the words of St. Francis.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.