



“Making Choices”

Text: Mark 8:31-38

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Peter is an interesting character. He is spontaneous. Speaks whatever comes into his mind. He is the first person to declare Jesus the Son of God. Yet in this passage, he rebukes Jesus. Can you imagine rebuking the person you just earlier had referred to as the Messiah, the Son of God? A lot can change in a short period of time. Because, despite recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, Peter still can't fully comprehend this whole suffering and dying thing that Jesus is talking about. It seems he is still holding onto the idea of the Kingly Messiah; the one who will overcome the evil rulers of the world and establish his kingdom for all; where all will live in this heavenly kingdom on earth.

Maybe Peter really didn't say anything we haven't thought of or even wanted to hear. Jesus has a very different understanding of discipleship than what most of us probably want. When another's reality and vision begin to conflict with and overtake our own we rebuke. We take them aside to enlighten them, help them understand, show them the error of their ways. That's all Peter did.

If we were really honest haven't we, at some point, disagreed with Jesus, asking why he doesn't do what we want? Why won't he see the world our way? It all seems so clear to us.

If he can silence and cast out the demons in the demoniac, than he can silence the voices in our heads, the self-incrimination, the self-loathing, the regret, the bitterness.

If he can heal Peter's mother in law, than why not those we love?

If he can cleanse the leper, why does our life sometimes leave us feeling unclean and isolated?

If he can make the paralytic walk, why are so many crippled by fear, dementia, or addiction?

If he can calm the sea surely he could calm the storms of our world. Yet they rage on; violence, war, poverty, racism.

If he can keep Jarius' daughter from dying, then why not our children, our friends, our loved ones?

If he can feed 5,000 with a few fish and pieces of bread, why does so much of the world go to bed hungry?

People question God, doubt God, wrestle with God over these questions. But that's a good thing. I've spent my life wrestling with God, questioning God, and that is good because that is how we learn and grow and come to a fuller understanding of who God is and how we can make sense, if even just a little bit, of the grief and horrors that face people every day. Those who don't wrestle with these questions lose faith. Others never start their journey, saying there could be no God with all the bad things that exist in the world.

As it was for the disciples in Jesus' time, it is for us now. We all have our own images and wishes of who Jesus is and what he should do. And, all is well when Jesus is casting out those demons and putting those religious and political leaders in their place, when he is raising people from the dead. We like that Jesus. That's who we think about when we worship him, isn't it? We want to follow that Jesus. HE is our Lord and Savior.

Yet Jesus will not, however, conform to our image of who we think he is or who we want him to be. Instead, he asks us to conform to who he knows himself to be: the one who "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 sets a choice before us. It is a choice we each have to make. Again and again the circumstances of life set that choice before us.

We either choose ourselves and deny Jesus or we deny ourselves and choose Jesus. "If any want to become my followers," he says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Self denial is the beginning of discipleship.

It probably isn't what Peter had in mind when Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people." I wonder if that is what we had in mind when we came to church today, or what we think about when our baby is baptized, or how often we understand and practice our faith as daily self denial.

Jesus' words are hard and his way extreme. Surely God did not covenant with his people and bring them out of Egypt into the promised land only to say, "Now let it all go." The Messiah is supposed to offer security, protection, and put Israel back on top. Faith in Jesus, Peter is learning, is not about elimination of risks, the preservation of life, and the ability to control. Instead, Jesus asks us to risk it all, abandon our lives, and relinquish control to God. That is what Jesus is doing and he expects nothing less of those who would follow him.

The way of Christ, self-denial, reminds us that our life is not our own. It belongs to God. It reminds us that we are not in control, God is. Our life is not about us. It is about God. There is great freedom in knowing these things. We are free to be fully alive. Through self denial our falling down becomes our rising up, losing is saving, and death is resurrection.

As long as we believe our life is about us, we will continue to exercise power over others. And that is a key issue I've been learning through this denominational book study, how truly our belief in our lives being about us does exercise power over others, keeps others down as we want the best for the least amount of money and that comes through basically slave labor, the minimum wage worker at the fast food restaurant to the garment worker in China, Vietnam, or India. When we try to save ourselves, control our circumstances, and maybe even rebuke Jesus, we need to listen to Jesus' words back to us: "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus rarely exercised power over others or tried to control circumstances. He simply made different choices. Self denial is not about being out of control or powerless. It is about the choices we make.

Jesus CHOSE to GIVE in a world that TAKES, to LOVE in a world that HATES to HEAL in a world that INJURES, to GIVE LIFE in a world that KILLS. He offered mercy when others sought vengeance, forgiveness when others condemned, and compassion when others were indifferent. He trusted God's abundance when others said there was not enough. But there's always enough with God's abundance. With each choice he denied himself and showed God was present.

At some point those kind of choices will catch the attention of and offend those who live and profit by power, control, and looking out for number one. They will deny themselves. They will respond. Jesus said they would. He knew that he would be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes. It happens in every age for those who choose the path of self denial. When it happened for Jesus, he made one last choice. He chose resurrection over survival.

"If anyone wants to become my follower, take up your cross and follow." Amen.

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