

I wonder if most of us can identify with Jellyroll's lyrics at some point and time in our lives? Friends, it's okay to not be okay. We're living in uncertain times, and we're called to walk straight through the shadows we can't escape: temptations that whisper we don't need God, fear that keeps us from trusting, worry that keeps us from peace, despair and cynicism that keep us from hope, and idols we don't even realize we're worshiping. Jesus knows this despair, worry, fear and grief; he cried out from the depths of despair, walking all the way to the shadow of the cross. Peter and the other disciples lived in uncertain times as well in the midst of meeting Jesus on the road. This morning we continue our Lenten series of meeting Jesus on the road. In today's Gospel story in Mark, Jesus and his disciples continue on the road to Jerusalem.

"Throughout this section of Mark's Gospel Jesus tells his disciples three times that they are going to Jerusalem, where he will be put to death. And each of these three times, they clearly do not understand what the stakes are, for him and for themselves. Then, three times, Jesus explains what discipleship looks like and what the costs may be" (Campbell and Fohr, *Meeting Jesus On the Road*). Today's story is the first of the three. Here we enter on the heels of a climactic moment when Peter, who wasn't afraid to speak and represent his fellow disciples, answered Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" correctly. He answered, "You are the Messiah" (8:29). As soon as the title, "Messiah," leaves Peter's lips, we feel a sense of pride and breakthrough with the disciples and their comprehension, like they're contestants on a game show. That is, until we read what follows in today's story. The shift is abrupt. It's going to get messy. Things will not be okay, and it will be alright. You

see, we have the advantage of knowing the full story. The disciples in today's story do not. **This morning we're talking about a new allegiance.** What better time to reflect on Jesus' telling his disciples to take up their cross and follow him than in Lent?! If I've said it once, I've said it many times, when it comes to scripture, know the context. Up until this point in Mark's Gospel, the emphasis has largely been on the miraculous deeds of Jesus. Very little has been said about Jesus' identity that enables him to perform these miracles. Until now. One could safely assume that there was some confusion in expectations not only in Jesus' identity/titles but also in loyalties/allegiances as his disciples. Peter and the other disciples are not picking up what Jesus is throwing down, and the path to the cross is getting shorter. Keep in mind that it will take the resurrection for the disciples to understand what messiahship- and discipleship- truly mean in regards to Jesus. Before we turn to God's Word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

We do not know the underlying reason for Peter's rebuke of Jesus. Mark doesn't tell us. Clearly, Peter was moved to express his strong disapproval of Jesus' pronouncement. Although we don't know why, I wonder if "by calling Jesus "Messiah," or "the Christ," Peter declares, "I think you're the one who will purify our society, reestablish Israel's supremacy among the nations, and usher in a new era of peace and holiness. I'm expecting big things from you, Jesus" (Matt Skinner, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org))! "This is one of those moments in Scripture that highlights the vast distance between us and God. Though Jesus is God with us, we cannot tame him or make him over into our image. We

would like a savior who is a winner, and one who makes us winners, but Jesus insists on identifying with the lowliest of losers” (Elisabeth Johnson, WP). I’m sure suffering, rejection and being killed wasn’t on Peter’s card for his Messiah! “We signed on for a crown, not a cross, Jesus!” “Good thing Peter is there to straighten Jesus out and show him the path ‘the Christ’ is supposed to follow (Skinner). Peter gets the title right but the meaning wrong. Jesus upends everything we expect a Messiah to be and to do for us! Here “Jesus- just like the Gospel author- embarks on a project of recasting who ‘the Christ’ is and what he will do. Jesus won’t wield power over others; instead, powerful and cynical people will have their way with him” (Skinner). Jesus rebukes Peter saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you’re setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (v33b). “From the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Satan was out to change Jesus’ course, to turn him away from the cross- to be another kind of messiah. But it is not possible. No cross, no crown” (W. Hulitt Glover, *Feasting on the Word (FOW)*)! Peter’s rebuke reflects the way we humans think. “The way to victory is the way of power and might, the might that makes all things right and results in a glorious kingdom. Just look at human history. Just look at our own lives. But for Jesus and any who would be his followers, there is another way” (Glover). And that other way is self-denial and cross-bearing. These things describe what it means to follow Jesus. This passage asks us to consider where our loyalties lie and what we are called to do as followers of Jesus” (Campbell and Fohr). I think it’s a safe assumption to say that like Peter and the other disciples, we, too, have our own ideas of not only of our expectations of Jesus but also what it looks like to be a

follower of Jesus. A colleague posted the following question this week. "What does it mean to be a Jesus follower?" Then he posted a cartoon for reflection. The cartoon (Cohen 2012) has an angry looking man, pointing his finger at something or someone and saying, "Christians are under attack in this country, and we're fighting back! What do you expect us to do?! Turn the other cheek?! Love our enemies?! Beat our swords into plowshares?! Jesus, standing next to him with his arms crossed, says, "Well actually..." Theologian Henri Nouwen says, "The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are the true saints." But I digress.

Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (v. 34). "Both of these phrases have been widely misunderstood across the centuries. Let's start with denying self. "This saying has been spiritualized and used as a tool of oppression. Some have taking this to mean giving up ordinary comforts and adopting a lifestyle of poverty. For others, it means denying oneself something pleasurable for a period of time, like giving up chocolate for Lent" (Campbell and Fohr). Self-denial is not primarily about squashing our desires or delaying gratification. "Jesus calls us to separate ourselves from what defines us. A person in Jesus' culture was defined by those to whom he belonged- usually household or kin. Jesus calls people to embrace new understandings of identity. Disciples join a community defined by association with Jesus. Self-denial is not self-

annihilation, but complete redefinition” (Skinner). Jesus is not suggesting suffering as a divine good in itself. Theologies of redemptive suffering have led to abuse, particularly for women, persons of color, and persons experiencing homelessness and poverty. “Jesus has spent over seven chapters here alleviating needless suffering or oppression whenever he encounters it; how could he be endorsing these things here? Do not allow this text to perpetuate or excuse victimization. The kind of suffering Jesus acknowledges is a particular kind: persecution resulting from following him” (Skinner). To be absolutely clear- self-denial and cross-bearing come with their risks.

Cross-bearing is, perhaps, even more misunderstood. “‘We all have our crosses to bear’ is applied to a variety of difficulties, from being used in jest to expressing frustration over minor inconveniences to describing truly difficult situations like temptations, long-term sickness, or difficult relationships. Believers can tend to allegorize any unpleasantness as a ‘cross’ and then spiritualize it as part of discipleship” (Christy Gambrell, [link](#)). No! Absolutely not! Nothing could have been further from what the writer and first hearers of this Gospel understood” (Campbell and Fohr). Did you notice that Jesus says this to his disciples BEFORE his crucifixion? That’s because crucifixion was still actively practiced by the Roman Empire. “Many early Christians were crucified, most likely including Peter. For a community where following Jesus’ way could (and did) lead to death, ‘take up your cross’ was not and could not be spiritualized into a metaphor for just any hardship” (Campbell and Fohr). We must watch out for dangerous interpretations that harm

others. They have nothing to do with the meaning of these words in context. Cross-bearing, much like self-denial, means much more than patience or obedience. "It means death. It means the resignation of one's reputation and life. Crosses imply rejection; those who bore crosses in the Roman imperial world were publicly declaring that their society or their leaders had denied them. Those who follow Jesus, associating with this vividly rejected Christ, take on an identity and a way of living that pose threats to the world's corrosive ideologies and idolatries. Yes, Christ calls followers to journey with him and following Jesus is not a wandering voyage; it points a particular direction, ending up at crucifixion and resurrection. Want to learn who Jesus really is? Follow him. What's the proper response to the truth that he is the Messiah, God's anointed? Following him. What does it mean to follow him, to truly participate in the kingdom he proclaims and the work to which he calls us? It means to expect the same consequences he faced in life and in death" (Skinner).

Friends, Peter's remarks remind us how weird- how strange- how counter-cultural it is to embrace a suffering Christ. "We would rather define Jesus according to our own priorities" (Skinner). And we would rather read this call to discipleship as an individual call rather than communal. But that is not the way it works in the kingdom of God. "In a very real sense, Jesus denied or renounced himself as defined by his family and created a new family based on their shared allegiance to the good news or the reign of God. That is what he asks of his followers, then and now. In the early church, baptism meant a fundamental shift in

loyalty. Baptism was and still is about identity and belonging- turning away from sin and renouncing evil. Those being baptized profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That is, they promise to follow Christ and to be loyal or faithful to him. The Christian declared that Caesar was not Lord, although that was one of his titles; only Jesus Christ was Lord. This shift in loyalties put many early Christians in mortal danger, and many paid the price” (Campbell and Fohr).

“Discipleship is a journey, not an instantaneous accomplishment” (Alyce M. McKenzie, WP). Like Peter and the others, sometimes we get it right and sometimes we don’t. Thanks be to God Jesus continues to counter our bad theology and objections to his identity and mission in this world.

A friend and colleague posted that he had been going through some old files and stumbled across his wife’s step-grandfather’s sermons. He was a Southern Baptist minister. My friend posted one of his sermons from May of 1943. It’s hand-typed, front and back on five single-spaced half-sheets of paper held together by a rusted straight pin. The title? What Hitler and Jesus Had in Common. Points of Difference.” His opening sentence? “Does anyone feel shocked that I used that I use such a subject? His last sentence? “Be as true and loyal to Jesus as Hitler’s and the devil’s followers are to them” (Al Masters, Facebook). “When we are finally willing to accept Jesus for who he is, the suffering one who lays down his life for others, then we can understand who we are to be, and denying self, we can take up the cross and follow him” (Glover). Thanks be to God! Amen.