

Sermon for Proper 20 (B) Year B

(RCL) Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

The Path of Discipleship

For much of Christian history, being identified as a “disciple of Jesus” has been considered high praise. The disciples, after all, were the handpicked group of followers who lived, learned, and labored alongside Jesus. They were commissioned to heal the sick, baptize sinners, and proclaim the Good News of God in Christ to the ends of the earth.

But if we listen closely, we can't help but notice that Scripture does not always portray the disciples with such glamor and reverence. Consider today's reading: For the second time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus takes the disciples aside to teach them that he will soon be given over to human hands and will suffer, die, and rise again. And for the second time, the disciples don't get it.

In fact, Mark's Gospel tells of Jesus trying to teach the disciples this crucial lesson on three different occasions, and each and every time, the disciples don't get it. Instead, they're concerned with things like which one of them is the greatest and what the folks in town thought about them and what they were going to eat for lunch.

But what is most perplexing of all is the fact that, not only do the disciples fail to understand Jesus' teaching about his suffering, death, and resurrection, but they're also too afraid to ask Jesus any questions about it!

And as maddening as the disciples' failure to understand or even ask questions with the hope of understanding may sound to us, how often are we guilty of precisely the same thing? How often are we afraid to ask a question because we think we should know the answer, or because we're afraid our question is stupid, or even because we're afraid of the answer?

After all, if knowledge is power, then ignorance is weakness.

Perhaps the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus a question because they should have been paying better attention. Or maybe they were afraid to ask because Jesus would think they were ignorant. Or maybe, just *maybe*, they were afraid to ask Jesus a question because somewhere deep down, they already knew the answer.

Jesus said, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”

Mark, with his characteristic briskness and brevity, doesn't reveal the expressions on the disciples' faces when they heard Jesus utter these words. He doesn't tell us about the gasps and the horrified stares and the hard gulps. And he says nothing about the heavy hush that surely descended upon the disciples. All Mark says is, “They were afraid...”

And although Mark is also silent as to why the disciples were afraid, we can surmise that they feared for the fate of their friend and leader. Each and every one of them had left their families and their livelihoods to take an enormous risk in following Jesus, and so hearing that he expects to be arrested and killed—never mind the bit about rising from the dead—all comes as quite a shock.

But what if the disciples were afraid for another reason as well? What if, along with their fear about what would become of Jesus, they were also afraid of what would happen to *them*? After all, if Jesus was arrested and killed, surely his closest associates would come under scrutiny as well. Perhaps what was at the root of the disciples' fear is the fact that they were beginning to understand, even just a little, what the true cost of discipleship is.

In a world where wealth is good but more wealth is better; where consumerism is king; and where our worth is measured by what we have rather than what we give, the cost of discipleship is hard news that many would prefer not to hear. But it is also the Good News that we so desperately *need* to hear!

A few weeks ago, Episcopalians from around the world gathered near Hayneville, Alabama to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the martyrdom of Jonathan Daniels who was killed during the height of the Civil Rights movement in 1965. Daniels' death came as a result of his pushing an African-American teenager named Ruby Sales out of harm's way when the two walked into a corner store to buy a soft drink, only to be met by an irate man pointing a loaded shotgun at them.

The cost of discipleship was, for Jonathan Daniels, his very life. And as the disciples began to process their fear about what Jesus was teaching them, perhaps they were beginning to realize the heavy cost that discipleship would place on their own lives. These are, of course, extreme cases, but they make plain the fact that we cannot confess the faith of Christ crucified and risen without coming to terms with the reality that discipleship places a claim on us—it *costs* us something. For some of us, it may cost us what is popular. For others, it may cost us our comfort zones. And for still others, it may even cost us a friend.

Of course, there is an easier way. We could simply listen to Jesus' hard teaching about suffering and death and resurrection and continue on without asking any questions—as if nothing had ever happened. But deep down in our bones, this path will leave us wanting. It'll leave us to preach a half-hearted and watered-down Gospel that has more to do with being comfortable and complacent than with the cross of Christ.

No, the path of discipleship is hard. It leads us through suffering and even death, and it costs us dearly. But in the end, we discover that it is this path that leads to resurrection and life! Amen.

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