First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

2/25/24

A Price Too High?

Mark 8:31-38 - NRSV

**31**Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man 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. **32**He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33**But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” **34**He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **35**For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. **36**For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? **37**Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? **38**Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

This might not be the easiest passage to hear, or to preach on, truth be told. I think the reason for that is that this passage contains some inconvenient truths which many Christians would prefer to gloss over. Jesus’ frustration is on full display, which runs counter to the narrative of Jesus meek and mild, and the writer of Mark’s gospel isn’t pulling any punches in describing how Jesus feels here.

In the verses immediately preceding today’s reading, Peter has declared Jesus to be the Messiah, after which Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone who he is. Of course, Jesus then turns right around and starts telling the disciples what’s going to happen to the Son of Man. What’s unclear here, is whether Jesus is talking to his disciples or to the larger crowd that was accompanying them on their journey. Either way, Peter gets upset and starts to rebuke Jesus. “Hey, dude,” “What’s this?” “I just admitted that you’re the Messiah, and now you’re telling us that you’re gonna get killed?” What’s up with that? Just stop it! Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter making it very clear that suffering, rejection and death, was the price he would have to have to pay to be obedient to God’s will. Bless Peter’s heart, he’s trying so hard to understand what’s going on but he can’t get past the image of the Messiah being this super human figure who was going to end the Roman occupation, which was a lesson he’d been taught all of his life.

After Jesus rebukes Peter, he turns to the larger crowd and tells them the price they’re going to have to pay if they want to follow him. They’re going to have to deny themselves, take up their cross, lose their lives and not be ashamed of Jesus or his words. Again, many followers of Christ would prefer not to engage with these words, because of the implications that actually having to live out the message that these words contain, is too much.

 I imagine to the first century crowds, these words must have come as a real shock. I wonder if some of Jesus’ followers started to have second thoughts about following this itinerate preacher, and it wouldn’t surprise me to learn that some folks might have considered the price too high and simply drifted away.

Today, I want to focus primarily on verse 35, which reads, *“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”*

On the surface, this verse implies that followers of Jesus must lose their physical lives, in order to be a true follower of the gospel and, in doing so, find the path by which they would gain eternal life in God’s presence. And many people have done just that, over the centuries. While I respect this interpretation and honor those who have given up their actual physical lives in order to follow Jesus, I think there’s another way to look at this verse.

When we make the decision to commit ourselves to following the teachings of Jesus, our lives change. I think we can all agree that changes in thoughts, words and deeds are what’s supposed to happen. The old way of thinking, speaking and acting; that old life, goes away, or dies, and we begin a new life; a new way of thinking, speaking and acting. At least, again, that’s what’s supposed to happen.

But, that’s not always the case, as we know. Too often, people who commit to following Jesus want to do so only on their own terms. They become reluctant to go all in, preferring instead to allow their own prejudices and biases to hold them back from fully committing. The price of giving up those prejudices and biases, makes a total commitment to the gospel message too high, for many.

In April of 1963, Martin Luther King Jr, was in Birmingham, attempting to end racial segregation in the city. He had been jailed for his efforts, and in an article printed in the local paper, eight white clergymen attacked King’s efforts as ill-timed, misguided, and inopportune. They went on to admonish King, telling him that this was not the time and he should wait for a more appropriate moment to launch a campaign for racial equality. Now, understand, these eight white clergymen were not radical, fundamentalist Christians. They represented mainline Protestant denominations and they were rightly considered moderates.

King’s response came in the form of his famous letter from the Birmingham jail, where he outlines the failings of white moderates, people who are sympathetic in the abstract but judgmental of the tactics deployed in actual campaigns, and the limitations of the white church with regard to endeavors supporting Black Americans obtaining their human rights.

For these white clergymen, living out the gospel message of justice and equality was simply a price too high to pay. These gentlemen, which unfortunately included at least one Presbyterian minister, could not let go of their own biases and prejudices, in order to live into the new life that comes from following the teachings of Christ.

While it’s bad enough that these unnamed Birmingham clergymen refused to go all in, when it came to equality and justice for African Americans, there are those, in 2024, who claim to be followers of Christ, who have outright rejected one of the central teaching of our faith.

Last year, Russell Moore, the former head of the Southern Baptist Convention warned that Christianity is in a “crisis.” Moore wrote that, *"Multiple pastors tell me, essentially, the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount, parenthetically, in their preaching…only to have someone come up after to say, 'Where did you get those liberal talking points? Moore said.’ "When the pastor would say, 'I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ' ... The response would be, ‘Yes, but that doesn't work anymore.’ “That's weak," he added. "When we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as subversive to us, then we're in a crisis.”*

When did the Sermon on the Mount become “subversive” and “weak?” When did following the teachings found in the Beatitudes become too high a price to pay to be followers of Jesus?

So, my question to you is this: In your own life, is there a point where living out the gospel has become too expensive? Are there biases and prejudices that you hold onto that make the price of following Jesus too high?

We are called to be all in; all in for the gospel, all in for justice for the marginalized, all in for equality for all of God’s children, all in for mercy for the weak.

If you find yourself thinking that the price to achieve justice, equality and mercy, for all, is too high I would invite you to reexamine what the gospel truly means to you and I would also invite you to recommit yourselves to become more than just people who are sympathetic in the abstract, but judgmental of the tactics used to achieve those goals of justice, equality and mercy.

Siblings, the price of, discipleship, the cost of following Jesus is not, and can never be, too high if we truly believe in the good news of the gospel. AMEN