

The Concerns of God

Mark 8:31-38

Second Sunday in Lent/ 25th February 2024

“If any want to become my followers,” Jesus said, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk. 8:34). This is the first mention of the cross in Mark’s Gospel, spoken not only to the disciples but offered as an open invitation to the crowd. Jesus turns his attention to the crowd because he’s frustrated with Peter’s short-sightedness and stubbornness. Jesus has just explained to the disciples that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected [by the religious authorities], and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk. 8:31). Peter, after having just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah (Mk. 8:27-30), pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. *What are you saying? What are you doing?* But then Jesus rebukes Peter and puts him in his place, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (MK 8:33). In other words, “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

That’s when Jesus turns to the crowd and says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” It almost sounds like this declaration comes from a place of deep frustration, doesn’t it? Irritated with Peter, Jesus wants everyone to be clear about what he’s about. And there’s something really jarring about this verse, though; it feels out of context. We hear it from our place in history, post-Easter. We know what the crowd did not know that day; we know Jesus will die on a cross. Mark’s community would have known all about the cross; his Gospel was written in 70 CE. However, in the flow of Mark’s telling of the story, this reference to the cross feels out of place. If Jesus actually said these words to the crowd, if that was what Jesus meant by being a disciple or follower, denying oneself and taking up a cross, that that was what Jesus was inviting them to, to death—on a *cross* of all things (!)—I can imagine the people slowly starting to run away—run away, fast. It sounds like a death cult.

But we can’t run. Our problem today is that perhaps we have become desensitized to references and images of the cross. We must never forget, especially during Lent, that the crucifixion was a particularly ghoulish form of capital punishment reserved for persons who committed a crime against the Roman Empire.¹ It had only one connotation for those in the crowd that day and only one for Mark’s church. I can’t imagine anyone in Mark’s church ever talking about the cross as simply a synonym for bearing one’s burden, as we do today. “Crucifixion was and remained a political and military punishment...”² For the Jews, it was an offensive and scandalous and humiliating, shameful way to die. Throughout the Empire, not least in Judea, “it was inflicted above all on the lower classes, among enslaved people and violent criminals, for enemies of the state.”³ And “Taking up the cross” was a specific...part of the Roman custom. The person condemned to crucifixion was ordered to carry his own cross to the place of death.⁴

Is this what Jesus had in mind when he invited people in the crowd to take up a cross and follow him? Denying self—this at least makes some sense (although it’s not easy). But to take up a cross—not just some, but everyone—that requires an entirely different level of commitment. Are we up for that? Honestly, are we up for that? Should we take this statement literally? If we all died on a cross, who would be left to do the work of God? Is Jesus just talking

metaphorically? If so, then we're left with deciding the meaning of the metaphor. Then, we run the risk of just thinking of the cross as a particular burden we are being asked to bear.

But Jesus is explicit here: "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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" (Mk. 8: 36-37). Jesus is talking about something more than a metaphor. But what if the reference to the cross in this text actually prevents us from seeing and hearing Jesus' point?

As we all know, if we're honest about the past, the cross has become an ambivalent sign or symbol. The cross only became a symbol of Christianity after Emperor Constantine (c. 272-337) became a Christian and signed the Edict of Milan in the fourth century, in 313. Among the oldest frescoes in the catacombs in Rome, where Christians worshipped, celebrated Communion, where they lived and buried their dead, you won't find crosses. Instead, you'll find images of Jesus at the table breaking bread. It was the Romans who turned the cross into a symbol of Christian nationalism—and it's good to remember that Christian nationalism is not a recent phenomenon. Post-Constantine, the cross became a sign of triumph, domination, and victory, particularly crosses without a depiction of a suffering, dying Jesus. When the cross is combined with a particular political ideology or the philosophy of a dominant culture, it is very dangerous—and it cheapens the meaning of the cross. It was a rare thing in the centuries after the Reformation for Presbyterian churches to have crosses in their sanctuaries.

We must watch carefully how the cross is "used" and how its message gets distorted. In 1923, Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) placed crucifixes back in the schools and public buildings to shore up religious support for making Italy great again. The cross, a symbol of divine, suffering love hanging in weakness, was used to advance despotic rule and nationalism. Fast forward to the United States in 2021. Do Google a search of "cross and January 6 insurrection." Click on images, and you can see the countless pictures of people in the crowd holding tall (ten-foot, twelve-foot), thick, heavy crosses as they stormed the U.S. Capitol, along with pictures of the so-called Christian flag, with its red cross on a blue field, waving in the wind. That's *not* what Jesus meant when he said his followers should take up their crosses. That was an abomination, a scandalous use of the cross. Then and now, the church must denounce the politicization of the cross. And I'm afraid we'll only see more of this as we head toward Election Day. It is very dangerous.

Perhaps Jesus' statement to the crowd about the cross needs to be heard within the context of the verses that precede it. Mark 8:31 is the first indication in the Gospel that Jesus will suffer and be killed. Peter doesn't understand this statement. It's clear, though, that Jesus is not troubled by it—or at least not in the way Peter is. Peter is being adversarial—Satan means the "Adversary"—because, as Peter usually does, he's setting his sights on the wrong thing.

The only thing that is uppermost in Jesus' mind is doing the will of God, preaching the kingdom of God, calling people into the kingdom, reforming and liberating God's people. "Divine things." The "concerns of God." God's vision for his life. That's what's grounding him, motivating him, and carrying him forward to Jerusalem. Jesus knows that to be fully human means to have one's life aligned with the life and vision and love of God. To be alive is to be called to do God's will. And doing God's will is never easy—it's not supposed to be easy. But we are willing and able to endure the cost of following God's will because God's will is ultimately

about love. We are willing to endure and suffer *because* we love: because we love God and love what God loves.

“When Jesus defines the Christian disciple as one who picks up their cross, he is saying that the disciple must fully bear the cost of doing God’s will.” The cross for the disciple is not exactly the same cross that Jesus experienced. However, we could also say that the cross of the disciple *is* identical to the cross of Jesus in that it—the cross—“is the *consequence* (not the condition) of righteousness. The cross is what Jesus Christ was forced to bear for doing God’s will.”⁵ The cross is the consequence of love, his love for God, his love for the things and people that God loves, and his love for God’s will because God’s will *is* love. In losing his life in God’s will, Jesus saved his life; that is, he preserved his life’s integrity, meaning, and purpose. To give our lives to “human concerns,” the often limited, narrow, selfish, and fearful agendas that are oblivious to God’s will and claim on us, is to lose the integrity, meaning, and purpose of our lives.

The cross, then, is the consequence of bearing God’s love into the world, a world that is often not interested in the concerns of God. Jesus shows us how it’s done. And his disciples, for two millennia, continue to show us how it’s done. Who are those teachers for you? Who inspires you to bear God’s love into the world, a world often at odds with the concerns of God?

For me, the life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), the German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis in 1945, is never far from my awareness. The Church today has much to learn from Bonhoeffer and his colleagues in the Confessing Church, who were confronted by the evils of Christian nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s. In his extraordinary work *The Cost of Discipleship*, written for young pastors in 1937 who would soon be without pulpits (because they were removed by the Nazis) or later conscripted, Bonhoeffer wrestled with what it means to be a follower of Christ. Bonhoeffer makes a distinction between cheap grace and costly grace. “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.” Grace, “costly grace,” as Bonhoeffer said, “confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus....” It is costly because it requires something of us. It costs us. It places a burden and a demand upon our lives.⁶

Thursday was the memorial of Sophie Scholl (1921-1943), who a student at the University of Munich in the early 1940s. She was a member of the White Rose movement against the Nazis. She was arrested and executed in 1943, along with her brother and others, for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets throughout the campus. That was it. She grew up in a Lutheran church and studied philosophy and theology, as did her brother (was also executed). Her faith informed her courageous actions.

A week ago, Friday, the world learned about the death of Alexei Navalny (1976-2024) in a Russian penal colony in the Arctic Circle. Consider the sacrifices he made, and his sufferings, which were the consequence of him being faithful to the calling of his life. I use the word “calling” intentionally because it’s clear that he was called. In February 2021, on trial in Moscow City Court, Russia, quoted the Bible in his closing testimony. This is what he said: “I was once quite a militant atheist...the fact is that I am a Christian, which sets me up for constant ridicule.” Citing the Sermon on the Mount, Navalny said, “‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied’ [Mt. 5:6]. I’ve always thought that this particular commandment is more or less an instruction to activity. And so, while certainly not really

enjoying the place where I am, I have no regrets coming back, or about what I'm doing. It's fine, because I did the right thing. On the contrary, I feel a real kind of satisfaction. Because at some difficult moment I did as required by the instructions, and did not betray the commandment."⁷

The cross is the consequence of bearing God's love into the world, a world that is often not interested in the concerns of God. It's that love that sent Jesus into the world, that held him throughout his life, it was the source of his life, his ministry, his joy. Behind, above, around, before, and within the cross and the crosses we take up as Christ's disciples ultimately is love. A love that will never let us go.

It's fitting that the choir's offertory this morning is Elaine Hagenberg's "[O Love](#)," a beautiful rendering of George Matheson's (1842-1906) poem and hymn, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go." Matheson was a Church of Scotland minister. Engaged in his late teens, he learned that he was going blind. When his fiancé heard that there was nothing to be done, she told him that she could not go through life with a blind man. Nearly blind at 18, he went to the University of Glasgow and trained to be a parish minister. He never married. On the evening of his sister's wedding in 1882, in the manse of Innellan (on the Western shores of the Clyde in Argyllshire) in Scotland, he was reminded of his own heartbreak. At that moment, he wrote a poem, which he completed in five minutes. It "came like a dayspring from on high." The poem was set to music in 1884.⁸ "O love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee."

O Love – the ground of everything, which holds us and never lets us go, even when, perhaps especially when, we're asked to take up something for that same love.

¹ Richard I. Deibert, *Mark* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), 67.

² Cited in Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994), 245.

³ Cited in Myers, 245.

⁴ Myers, 246.

⁵ Deibert, 67.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 47-48. The German title was *Nachfolge*, meaning "the act of following" or "succession." Bonhoeffer wrote, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like [Martin] Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time..." (99).

⁷ On Navalny's faith see: "[How the Christian faith became Navalny's support in prison](#)." Or: "[Nalvany commemorated by Christians worldwide after death in prison camp](#)." For a transcript of his closing testimony, see: <https://www.rightsinrussia.org/navalny-2/>.

⁸ For more on Matheson, see Ian Bradley, *O Love That Wilt Not let Me Go: Meditations, Prayers and Poems by George Matheson* (HarperCollins, 1990). Albert L. Peace (1844-1912), a well-known Scottish organist of his day, wrote the tune ST. MARGARET at the request of the Scottish Hymnal Committee. According to Peace, the tune came to him as quickly as the text had come to Matheson: "After reading it over carefully, I wrote the music straight off, and may say that the ink of the first note was hardly dry when I had finished the tune."