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Mark 8:27-38

ARE YOU COMING?

There is nothing about the text we read from Mark's gospel that is designed to attract people to Christianity. Jesus tells his followers, "Listen up! I'm going the way of suffering, rejection, and even death." And then he turns to his followers and states with expectation, "Are you coming?" It's bad enough to have a Messiah who dies a humiliating death on a cross. But now he's taking us there with him!

The crosses we see around us today are usually quite pretty. Bright shiny crosses decorate our sanctuaries. Gold and silver crosses are worn around our necks as jewelry. But in Jesus' day, crosses struck terror in the hearts of all who saw them. Crosses were state sponsored instruments of torture. Crosses were the places where criminals, low lifes, and insurrectionists were sent to die. And death on a cross was agonizing. There was nothing noble or glorious or heroic in dying on a cross.

The cross was not someplace Jesus' followers wanted or expected him to end up. The messiah they wanted—the messiah we all want, really—is someone who triumphs over enemies, defeats oppressors, and crushes the wicked. For the messiah to wind up on a cross would be a sign of total failure.

But Jesus upends those assumptions of what kind of messiah he will be and how he will confront evil and darkness in our world. Jesus sharply rebukes Peter's misunderstanding of the Messiah. God's kingdom of peace and justice will not be won by replicating the systems and structures of domination and coercion. Rather, God's realm will be achieved through

transforming this world through the supremacy of humility, sacrifice, and love. But to achieve that transformation, the Messiah chooses to enter the world's pain, chooses to extend love and mercy, chooses to forgive and offer second chances, chooses to sacrifice and serve, chooses to offer radical generosity. Doing so, however, will mean the cross. For Jesus to walk God's way will mean confronting forces of hostility and resistance. For Jesus to walk God's way will mean hardships and sacrifice. And thus, for Jesus it means the cross.

And then he turns to his followers, to us, and states with expectation: Are you coming? Biblical theologian Clifton Black writes that "In no Gospel does Jesus say, 'It is my responsibility to die for you, while you applaud my heroism.'" Instead, Jesus turns to us and says, "Are you coming?" Jesus expects us to follow his example of transforming the world with his way of love, mercy, and justice. And he knows, he knows that if we do that, if we follow his way, we can expect the cross. We can expect hardships, struggle, rejection. We can expect to make sacrifices and to offer difficult service. We can expect adversity.

Jesus goes to the cross and takes us with him not because he celebrates suffering. Suffering is not the goal. Faithfulness to the way of God is the goal. But the cross is what you get when you walk with Jesus.

It is important to clarify that we are not talking about hardships and sufferings or abuses and tragedies that are imposed upon us. These are not the kinds of "crosses" that Jesus meant. Rather, Jesus is speaking about his followers making a *choice* to walk his way: to choose to love, even enemies, to choose to forgive, to choose to speak out, to stand up, to share, to serve, to risk. Jesus calls his followers to walk his way in the world. But he is upfront with a warning: it will involve the cross. The cross is not optional. The cross is not just born by a few really pious

saints. The cross is not something we can avoid if we are lucky. The cross is what will follow if you and I are following Christ.

It is said that during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, when Christians were suffering, dying, being tortured in the struggle for justice in that land, Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to gather his staff together each morning for prayer. And sometimes as he was closing, he would ask his staff, "If being a Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us?"

If being a Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us? Following the way of Jesus means putting ourselves in situations that will not be easy, smooth, or comfortable. Caring for the stranger, loving our enemies, standing up for the vulnerable, forgiving people who have hurt us, wrestling with just and ethical uses of our money--these are not easy and will not always be appreciated by our society, friends, neighbors. Christianity is not a box we check on a form. Christianity is a way of life, a daring, bold, unconventional, and often hard way of life.

Perhaps you are already familiar with the cross. Perhaps you are already well acquainted with the difficulty that comes from walking with Jesus. Maybe you experienced the cross in those painful efforts to forgive a person who terribly wronged you. Or through your ongoing efforts to love a person who is decidedly difficult to love. Or when investing your money you chose to consider not how much it would yield but who are the people your investment might be helping. Maybe your cross came with the rejection you experienced after standing up for vulnerable and powerless people. Maybe you experienced the cross when choosing to care for your relative with dementia, or through your steadfast dedication to a volunteer job that garnered

no fanfare or notice. Maybe you already know that walking the way of Jesus is not all sunshine and roses.

When you think about it, the message of the cross is a terrible marketing strategy. Who in their right mind would follow after such a man with such a message? Well, we do. We do because the way of Jesus is not fundamentally about the cross. Certainly the way of Jesus *involves* the cross. But the way of Jesus is fundamentally about life—the abundant, meaningful life Jesus wishes for us to know. Abundant, meaningful life. What Jesus offers us is a strange paradox. He says to us his followers, “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.”

It is a strange paradox for sure. Jesus invites us to walk with him so that we might have abundant, meaningful life. But do you know how you and I can tell if we are walking with Jesus? If there’s a cross.