

## **LESS ME, MORE JESUS**

Mark 8: 31-38

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I'm going to make a dangerous confession to you, this morning.

But first, let me say that I love my job.

I really love what I do. Rarely do I feel more alive than when I'm standing here, in this pulpit. I look forward to every Sunday morning like it is Christmas. The best part of my week is when I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to say, how I'm going to put into contemporary words, the promise and the challenge that I hear in the words of Scripture.

I tried retirement. The first three years I preached supply for pastors who were on vacation, sick, injured, or couldn't preach for whatever reason. Then Covid hit and I went two years without preaching a single word. I wrote a lot and I enjoyed writing but it just wasn't the same. No, it's preaching that I love – proclaiming, to the best of my ability, the words of scripture in contemporary language to a contemporary audience.

Now, with all that said, you can imagine how frustrated I must feel when I confess to you that about ninety percent of the time, I have no idea what I'm doing.

Perhaps I should explain

As closely as I can calculate it, I received my first call to the ministry in the summer of my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was my first experience of summer church camp. In those days summer camp was staffed mostly by pastors who were expected to give a week of their time to that important endeavor and so significant was their impact on me that I realized in that week that I wanted to be just like them. I wanted to be a minister.

I shared that thought with one of those pastors and he said something like, "Well, who knows? Maybe God is calling you to the ministry."

As I said last week, that was the first time. There were others. Throughout the sixties and seventies, I would do things, read things, go to things, and feel God tapping me on the shoulder and saying, "Well, whataya think? Ministry?"

My point here, is this: I was called to the professional ministry in the United Methodist Church of the sixties and seventies.

Now think for a moment what the United Methodist Church was like in the sixties and seventies. Or, if you weren't a Methodist in those days, think about any of the old Mainline Protestant denominations. They were all going pretty much along the same path.

Most of them peaked in membership and influence during that period. In 1960, Methodists (We weren't yet "united.") boasted just over 10.6 million members (10,647,864). We were the largest protestant denomination with the largest ethnic minority membership of any of the

protestant denominations. We were about 6 percent of the U.S. Population. And we were, by all accounts, still growing.

We would peak ten years later in 1970 with about 10.7 million members, around 5.3 percent of the total American population.

The Baby Boom generation was filling schools to capacity. The parents of the Baby Boomers had come out of World War II and the Korean War and were living in the midst of the Cold War and religious faith was important to them.

Not only that, church attendance was considered by them to be a civic responsibility. It was what decent, hard-working, honest, responsible people did. They went to church and they took their kids to church (whether they, the kids, liked it or not). They taught Sunday school and they painted the building. They cooked pancake suppers to raise money and they led the youth fellowship. They gave to missions and they sang in the choir.

The primary role of the pastor was, in those days, to open the doors of the church and wait for the crowds to come roaring in. Our churches were bursting with people and programs. The nurseries and the choir lofts were always full. For the first time in our history we had to consider having two services because we couldn't fit any more people into the sanctuary. It was also the pastor's responsibility to preach sermons that were both entertaining and inspiring and to teach what was then, innocently and popularly called the "Liberal Theology," that had issued forth from the works of Harry Emerson Fosdick, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, and Ernest Fremont Tittle – a daring and exciting amalgam of theological and philosophical rationalism and social justice activism.

It was during that time, when theological education was at its peak, that our church built the education wing to house all those kids.

I remember hearing a colleague of mine reminisce that the job of the pastor was like driving a twenty-mule team. Never mind trying to control it; just keeping the reins sorted out was about all he could manage. Another said that most of the time he felt like he wasn't so much leading as running alongside a stampede, trying to direct it without getting run over.

That was the state of the church when I was called to the ministry.

The churches of my youth were always big or getting big, growing, thriving, busy, exciting places where suburban kids could gather to have our minds challenged, our faith deepened, and our social life expanded.

So, I finally answered the call, entered the seminary in September of 1978, and, on June 9, 1982, I was ordained an Elder in the United Methodist Church. My first appointment was for a year in a small, two-church circuit just outside of Washington Court House. Then to Cincinnati to serve in a church pretty much like the ones I grew up in. I was, it appeared, going to be the pastor I had set out to be, doing all the things that my years of experience in the church and my college and seminary education trained me to do.

I would spend a few years at Shiloh working with Charlie Cecil and learning the ropes of parish ministry and then I would go on to pastor my own big, growing, thriving suburban church. I had grown up in such churches. I had spent most of my life watching pastors pastor them. I had noted the mistakes that they had made and the triumphs they had brought about. I had measured the impact they had had on my life and how they had managed to do it. I was going where I had always planned to go and being who I had always planned to be.

Except...except...something had changed when I wasn't looking.

Sometime while I was ensconced in the seminary, The United Methodist Church lost a million members in the USA. By 1980 we were down from 10.6 million to just over 9.5 million -- down from 6 percent of the American population to 4.2 percent.

We were told not to worry. It was a correction. Inflated figures were finally being purged from the membership rolls. Also, many of the Baby Boomers were in college or starting careers, times when church attendance always lagged. They would eventually mature and return to the church, we were told.

Only they didn't. The numbers continued to drop and they are still dropping, today, 42 years after my ordination.

As of 2021, the United Methodist Church had approximately 5,714,815 members in the United States a decline of nearly 30 percent since our peak in 1970. Where we were 6 percent of the population then, we are only 2.5 percent of the American population in 2021.

Since 2022, we lost about 25% of our churches, about half of those in the deep south, to disaffiliation but there's no way of accurately counting how many individual members that represented as not all members followed their churches who left the denomination.

What happened? Even before disaffiliation, our denomination and our churches were shrinking. Why?

The hierarchy of the church blamed the pastors. Poor leadership.

The pastors blamed the hierarchy of the church. No support.

The conservatives blamed the liberals and the liberals blamed the conservatives.

Young blamed old and old blamed young. Everyone, it seemed, blamed women pastors.

We all wanted a scapegoat that represented a clear, simple answer to the problem.

You know how it goes. We were all scrambling to 1.) Affix blame, and 2.) Plug the leak.

In the 42 years since my ordination, we have, I think, tried everything.

Some churches decided to get real conservative, ape the Baptists, be more fundamentalist and evangelical in their language and theology. As if there aren't already enough fundamentalist Baptist churches in this country. Other churches decided to get more liberal in their theology and, socially, more pluralistic and inclusive, more socially active. And they all discovered that some liberal churches grew but most of them continued to shrink and some conservative churches grew but most of them shrank, too.

Some churches decided to become more missional in their approach, to reach out more, to minister more to their community. And some of those churches grew, and some didn't.

Some churches decided to focus on their outreach to children and youth and they grew and some did the same thing and died.

Some churches introduced contemporary worship styles while others retreated to the old and traditional. Same results. Some grew, some didn't

Strategic planning, measurable goals, pastoral accountability, purpose driven, and targeted evangelism have become by-words. For a couple of years, until pastors and church secretaries rebelled and refused to do it, we were required to report to the conference every week, how many people were in worship and Sunday school, how many were baptized, how many new members were received, how many were involved in mission, and a host of other numbers.

And for all of this, the best we can say is that the decline in our membership did not get worse last year; it just held steady. It's still declining, you understand, it's just not declining any faster.

Well, I think I've made the point that the United Methodist Church of 2024 is not the Methodist Church of 1960. It's not the church I was called to ministry in, it's not the church I was confirmed and raised in, it's not the church I was ordained in. It's not even the church it was when I came to you these 18 months ago. I dare say, it's not even the church it was last month.

It's all different. And it's getting more different.

Remember that commercial from years ago? A little boy says, "Dad? Can I have a dog?"  
*No, you can't have a dog.*

Why not? You had a dog when you were a kid, didn't you?  
*Yeah, but things were different, then.*

Aren't things different now?  
*No, they're the same.*

Then, why can't I have a dog?

Sixty-four years ago, I was that boy. God, can I be a minister?

*Yeah, you can be a minister.*

Oh, great, can I be a minister like Charlie Cecil and Ross Mars and Mark Dove were?

*No, you can't.*

Why not?

*Things are different, now.*

Weren't things different then?

*No, they were the same.*

Then why can't I be like them?

Ask any minister my age and most of the younger ones, too. If they are honest, they will tell you what I told you just a few minutes ago: We have no idea what we are doing. We are making it up as we go. We were raised and trained to lead a different church than the church we have become. The resources which we have brought to this situation are insufficient to the task that has been set before us. We can, none of us, be the ministers we thought we would be and still serve God and his kingdom.

We must find within ourselves the strength of character to, with God's help, give up the fantasies and illusions we had about our ministries and be the pastors that we are being called to be not in 1960 but in 2024.

We must come to terms with the very real fact that the kingdom isn't about me, my ministry, my wishes, my dreams; it's about Jesus.

We must hear him say again that, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their [dream of what ministry will be like] will lose it, and those who lose their [dream of what ministry will be like] for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

See, that's what this passage from Mark is really all about.

It's not so much about dying in the literal sense as it is about giving up the life we had planned and accepting the life which Jesus offers. It's about dying to our personal goals and living the goals which Jesus places before us.

And the promise which Jesus offers is that when we give up the life we dreamed of and commit ourselves to the life we have, the life which God has given to us, we will find new passion, new energy, new hopes and new dreams. We will find ourselves living real, authentic life as God intended it to be lived.

**AMEN**