

“Jesus and His Call to Follow”

Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16; Roman 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

III of IX in the Sermon Series “Jesus”
Jeffrey Window panel “Calling the Disciples”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

February 25, 2024

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 2, February 25, 2024, dedicated to Malcolm James Blanks on his baptismal day, to Ron Jenkins and Will Davis after their survival of the devastating car accident yesterday, to Lynn Wallich on the loss of her beloved Pasha, and always to the glory of God!

There is so much packed into this passage from Mark, it is tough to do it justice. This is really a text worthy of study for extended time by a Bible study on Mark. There is two-edged use of the phrase “Son of Man” – the first time meaning Jesus himself, the second time reflecting the apocalyptic coming. Jesus announces he is going to be rejected, killed and raised from the dead. Peter rebukes Jesus for saying this. Jesus rebukes Peter for his rebuke of the Son of Man. Then he moves from the close in conversation to the crowds and calls them to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow. The questions about losing and saving your own life; “*What can you give in return for your life?*” is worth a sermon series on its own! Finally, dealing with people’s “shame” about the Son of God.

There is a lot going on here. Honestly, to go any one direction, is to deny the power and voracity of the all the other directions. Mark doesn’t use a lot of words – but he also never wastes any words. Let’s move in for a few minutes and make this passage our own...

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation. Amen.

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To follow Jesus is to move into this passage from Mark and let it take root in your soul. I am convinced of this after reading the words of our sainted, martyred brother Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Writing a short meditation on the cross in the early 1940s while battling against the evil of Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer reflected on this passage. He wrote, *“Suffering and rejection are the summary expressions of Jesus’ cross. Death on the cross means to suffer and die as someone rejected and expelled”* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Discipleship and the Cross,” *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY, 2006, pp.48-49).

Peter cannot deal with this. He cannot listen to Jesus talk about his own death by crucifixion. He thinks if he speaks forcefully enough, he can make it all go away. Jesus will live forever, and the disciples will have job security and fame by being so close to “THE One and Only Son of Man.”

Jesus challenges him in front of the crowds, “get behind me Satan.” He calls Peter “Satan” in front of everyone who is there. Jesus goes further. He says that if you want to follow him, if you want to be his disciple, you must **DENY YOURSELF, TAKE UP YOUR CROSS, and FOLLOW.** You can only save your life when you lose your life.

This is particularly hard for Peter to hear. It is a prediction of what Peter will do and say. He will deny Jesus (not himself). He will run away from the cross. He will save his own life (and therefore he will lose it). He will fail utterly. Jesus doesn’t want all the others to end up like Peter. In fact, he doesn’t want Peter to be the chief denier, the most frightened hider, and the least likely to succeed leader of the Jesus Movement. God has a funny

way of working on us – don't you agree. The Denier will become the great Evangelist. The one who leaves Jesus for dead, will follow the Risen Christ to his OWN CROSS and be crucified upside down (by his own request – not worthy to die as Christ died).

The crucifying cross is the symbol of everything wrong in the world. On it is placed the worst criminals, the most disgraced human beings, those who have been expelled, rejected, despised, abandoned, and suffer an anguishing and painful death. Jesus changes all of that by Rising to Eternal life! He redefines the meaning of the cross.

To wear the cross, is to bear all of this in mind, and carry it on our bodies and allow it to focus our hearts, minds and souls. To wear the cross is to carry the cross. As for myself, I never put the cross on lightly. I always know, once it is on, it must be part of me. Once I have placed the cross over my head and around my neck, on my shoulders, on my forehead, on the palm of my hands, I have given myself over to suffering and redemption; to expulsion and embrace; to past sinfulness and present and future grace. Let all agree never to carry the cross – in any way, shape or form – unless you are willing to “take up your cross” to follow Jesus. Let the cross never be for show value, but always be for showing the value of discipleship. Because, the way of the cross is the way of following Jesus.

Once we are on the path of discipleship, following Jesus (in the words of Henri Nouwen) is all about finding our way home in an age of anxiety. Here is the amazing thing – after the hard and challenging words of telling people to take up their cross to follow him – Jesus says, “don't be afraid to do it.” Fr. Nouwen talks about Jesus' call to follow in his book: *Following Jesus: Finding Our Way Home in an Age of Anxiety*. He points out that Jesus calls us to move away from the world of scarcity and thinking about scarcity all the time, to a world of abundance and seeing the world through the lens of abundance.

To do this means we need to stop being afraid all the time. We are afraid for ourselves. We are afraid of others. We are afraid of God. Fear makes us think

in terms of scarcity. Worry is the twin of fear. We worry about how we are going to survive. We worry about not having enough. We worry about the dangers of the world. We worry about living. We worry about dying. We worry about our children, your children and all children. When we worry we start hoarding ideas, items, and more. When we hoard we find ourselves focused on “our enemies” who we perceive will steal what we have. We need more locks, more walls, and higher, more impenetrable walls. Can you feel your blood-pressure rising?

Jesus calls us “o’re the tumult” as the hymn says. He says, “Aren’t you paying attention? I am the one who provides. I provide fish and bread. I give you healing and hope. I provide peace and connections with others. I am the Lord of Life! I provide abundance when you are pulling out your hair, and tearing off your clothes crying about having nothing.”

So, the question becomes – how do we respond? Jesus calls us to let go and to give away. With five loaves and two fish, he feeds 5,000+ and there are tons of leftovers. He wants us to lean in – not fall back and hide out. He wants us to see that our plates are full because we actually are eating off of saucers. He wants us to get plates and fill them to overflowing with love and service.

I love what Henri Nouwen says, “*The great secret of the spiritual life is that you already know the little steps, even if you don’t know the big ones. You don’t need to know the big steps to take little steps. You only have to take one step at a time.*”

He continues, “*the Lord knows what the little steps are. For example, we could say, ‘I am not going to speak about that person that way anymore. I am not going to gossip.’ It is a little thing. Nobody notices. We still don’t like that person, but at least we are not going to say anything bad about them anymore. Little step. Then we smile at them. Then we invite them over. Before we know it we are friends. If we look back, we see it was a long journey of little steps*” (Henri Nouwen, *Finding Jesus*, The Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, Convergent Books, NY, NY, 2019, p.43).

All the great people in the world started with little steps. Following Jesus is one little step after another. Today, we are seeking to build closer relationships in the communities where we live. We are doing it by zip codes over lunch in parish hall. Little steps – five numbers is all it takes sequenced in a certain configuration. Then a sandwich. A smile. A handshake. A hug. You may discover someone who lives on your street and belongs to First Church.

I was in Lewis Center the other day meeting Adeline Jane Schwartz for the first time and discovered that we have two young families who live four doors down from each other. How cool is that? I did each of their weddings, baptized their other children (Ada is coming up) and I receive Christmas cards each year – and they live four doors apart – 30 miles away.

Jesus calls us to listen, to believe and to follow. He asks for you to give him your love and to follow him. It is simple and it is complex. But, it is worth it.

At 9am – so my friends, together we will step forward in faith and discipleship. Thanks be to God. Amen.

At 11am – So young Malcolm James Blanks, welcome to the wild and wonderful family of Jesus. We just got better because you have come among us! Enjoy the ride. Amen.

