

“THE GREAT PRETENDER”

February 25, 2024 Mark 8:31-38

In 2002 a movie came out called, “**CATCH ME IF YOU CAN**” It starred Leonardo DiCaprio, Christopher Walken, Tom Hanks and others. Leo plays teenager Frank Abernathy, a clever runaway who turns to a life of crime, specifically conning people and writing bad checks. To run his con racket, Frank must pretend he is someone that he is not. He pretends to be an airline pilot, a doctor, and a lawyer. To pull off these ruses, Frank learns the lingo, forges identification documents, and discovers how financial institutions work. He became an expert in writing bad checks.

However, a problem develops the longer Frank leads the life of a pretender. Other than the fact he is a crook and fraud, the lines between fantasy and reality begin to blur for him. The harder it becomes to keep track of all his lies. The harder it becomes to be close to anyone lest they see him for what he truly is. Frank has to keep pretending and running until eventually his world comes crashing down upon him and he ends up in an isolated prison cell.

While most of us aren't breaking any laws, I can't help but wonder if we too are not pretending to be something we often are not. Most of us in this room would call ourselves Christians, claim Jesus is our Lord and Savior, and believe we are following Jesus. But are we really? Are we living the life Jesus has called us to or just pretending? Does our image

of following Jesus come more from our culture or more from Christ's words and life?

These are not easy questions, because let's be honest, who truly lives up to imitating Christ in all we do and all we say and all we think; and then do that all the time? No one I've met. Still, I don't think our imperfectness is an excuse that lets us off the hook. To follow Christ comes with some expectations. The season of Lent was designed to explore those expectations and examine ourselves in light of them. Where do we begin?

I. WHAT IS A DISCIPLE

Maybe we begin by asking what is a disciple? By the way, the word **disciple** appears over 250 times in the New Testament, in contrast to the word **Christian**, which occurs only 3 times. Maybe those statistics are trying to tell us something. What does Jesus ask of us? Here is where the Gospel of Mark helps us. The first half of his Gospel is concerned with who Jesus is. The second half tells us what it means to follow him. Mark doesn't fill in all the details, but rather gives us a starting point into discipleship.

A. THERE IS A COST. Mark writes, “**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. He said all this quite openly.**”

This week I read an article about a woman who in her 20's wanted to retire early. To achieve this, she put 75% of her income into savings and within 5 years had accumulated \$200,000. But it came with a heavy cost in terms of relationships. The woman sacrificed any kind of social life, no dating, no going out, no business connections, and had no money for simple pleasures. After this time period she realized her goal wasn't worth it. It cost too much.

Sidney Howard wrote, **“One half of knowing what you want is knowing what you must give up before you get it.”** There is a price to almost anything we want to accomplish. To be a professional athlete, earn a degree, play an instrument, learn a language or any other goal usually requires we give up time, finances, and other desires so we can focus and achieve our goal. **Why should it surprise us that our faith comes at a cost?** I don't like the idea of suffering, rejection, or even death any better than anyone else. Thankfully, the suffering and rejection are minor compared to what many early Christians faced.

Jesus is just being honest. Following him is not easy because his values are not the world's values. His definition of success runs counter to the world's. Joyce Rupp writes, **In other words, Jesus was cautioning them, “If you decide to give yourselves to what truly counts in this life, it will cost you. You will feel these teachings to be burdensome at times, like the weight of a cross.”** Be careful of being too well liked, too popular, too well spoken because there is a good

chance you've traded popularity for discipleship. It costs us to follow Jesus.

B. WHAT'S A DISCIPLE - "Jesus 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." Notice Jesus calls and speaks to the **crowd**, not just to a select few. He says if anyone wishes to follow me, meaning the invitation is wide open to be his disciple. There are no other qualifiers to become a disciple except the desire to follow. Period!

A couple of boys were fishing at their special pond off the beaten track. All of a sudden, the game warden jumped out of the bushes. Immediately, one of the boys threw his fishing pole down and started running through the woods. The game warden was hot on his heels.

After about a half-mile, the boy stopped to catch his breath, so the game warden finally caught up to him. **"Let's see yer fishin' license, little man!"** the warden gasped.

With that, the boy pulled out his wallet and gave the game warden a valid fishing license.

"Well, son," said the game warden, **"you must be about as dumb as a box of rocks! You don't have to run from me if you have a valid license!"**

"Yes, sir," replied the young man, **"but my friend back there, well, he don't have one."**

To deny oneself is not a call to self-loathing or rejection of self. It is a call to put Christ first and to put the needs of others ahead of your own. It is a denial of the grasping self, the self-seeking self, the wanting it my way self. To deny self is to belong to Christ and to say “yes” to his voice and command. It is a commitment to serve as Jesus did.

Secondly, Jesus said, “**take up your cross**”. Brian Stoffregen, pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Yuma, Arizona, writes, “I am more inclined to see the ‘taking up of one’s cross’ to be a picture of the criminal carrying the cross through the city, rather than the actual crucifixion. As I understand it, the act of carrying the cross was a public display of guilt which resulted in ridicule and scorn from the people. With this understanding, the phrase might be paraphrased: ‘**Be willing to publicly display your faith and suffer the consequences that such a display might evoke.**’

In other words, a disciple is one whose faith is readily seen, not because they are showing off, but because their words and actions point to Christ. People should not have to guess who we follow. A cross bearing person could not hide from the crowd. If we are so worried about what other people think when we put our faith in action, we are probably not following Christ.

Speaking of which, the simplest definition of disciple is one who follows Jesus. That sounds so obvious and yet I wonder how many times

we act like Peter who is telling Jesus what he can not do. You can't lead Jesus. Discipleship only works if Jesus is up front in the driver's seat.

A disciple is one who forgets about self, displays her faith, and let's Jesus take the lead. Obviously, not an easy way to live. However, the Christian life is a journey not an absolute. It is a vision we strive for, not a goal we reach on our own. It is a life pursuit that orients us to the Kingdom of God.

II. TEMPLATE

In my wood shop I have often used a template, especially when I want to make a repeated cut or shape in wood. A template is nothing more than a pattern to guide me in the process of my desired creation. I keep referring back to that template to make sure everything is lining up with my intended outcome.

In discipleship, Jesus is our template. Disciples are people who keep holding themselves up to the character, teachings, and life pattern of Jesus to make sure their lives are lining up with his. That's why we read the word, pray, worship, meet with other Christians, keep learning, listen to other viewpoints, and then reflect on those learnings. Discipleship requires the humility to take an honest look at our flaws, blind spots, thinking patterns, as well as the areas we are progressing in. It is to confess our templates often don't match up with Jesus, our opinions are often not based on facts, and that we still have a whole lot of growing up to do.

Marj Carpenter was an American reporter and mission interpreter for the Worldwide Ministries division of the [Presbyterian Church \(USA\)](#). She was elected to the church's top post, [Moderator of the General Assembly](#), in 1995. I heard her speak about 20 years ago. She told the story of visiting an African worship service, which included all ages.

Afterwards, she commented to the pastor that she was amazed how quiet all the babies were in church. Marj was one of those people who did not like noisy babies or children in church. The pastor said to her, “You don’t understand.” She asked, “What don’t I understand?” The pastor said, “Those good babies don’t cry out because they don’t get enough food to eat. As a consequence, they don’t have the strength to fuss in church.” Marj said, “A light came on, she would never complain again about a noisy child in church. Instead, she gave thanks that they child was nourished and healthy enough to make noise.” Jesus held the template on compassion up to Marj and in changed her heart and attitude. That’s a Lenten moment.

The good news is just because we fail to act like a son or daughter of God doesn’t stop us from being a child of God. We are still loved, still forgiven, and still wanted.

The second bit of good news is this Christian life isn’t always about succeeding but continuing to walk it. I believe God is less concerned about our batting average, than our willingness to keep stepping up to the plate and swinging away, trusting that sometimes we

will get it right. We will connect with the Spirit if we trust in the one who has called us up.

III. THE UPSIDE OF PRETENDING

One of the qualities I like about children is their ability to pretend. The creativity they use in pretending is amazing. They imagine what it's like to be a doctor, a ballerina, a musician, a teacher, and even the family cat. Children know they are none of these things in reality, but they are trying on their roles, feeling what they are like, and in the process discovering who they are. In other words, pretending is a good thing.

Perhaps there is an upside to pretending to be disciples of Jesus. Instead of looking at ourselves as hypocrites of the faith, we could look at ourselves as children in the faith, children who have the courage and imagination to keep trying to imitate and follow Jesus, until our pretending becomes a reality. The more we act, say, and think as a kingdom people the more we become a kingdom people. Maybe pretending isn't so bad after all. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, February 25, 2024

Second Scripture Lesson

Mark 8:31-38

³¹Then 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.

³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³But 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."

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

³⁵For 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.

³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

³⁸Those 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 is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.