

It's Not Easy Being Christian
Mark 8:31-38, Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
February 25, 2018 – Second Sunday of Lent

Today's Gospel Lesson is one of the most difficult in the entire lectionary. Each and every one of us here today wants to consider ourselves a Christian. Each of us wants to see ourselves as a follower of Jesus Christ. But each of us also seeks the various creature comforts of life; and how often have I, your pastor, preached that you must take care of yourself, and you're going to be hearing more about that in the coming months. But today's lesson seems to be in direct contradiction to that, for in today's lesson we're told that we must lose our lives, we must deny ourselves, indeed we are even called to take up a cross. How do we deal with all this?

The lesson starts with Jesus making the first of three passion predications in the Gospel of Mark. (Remember, I told you last week that three is a very biblical number.) So Jesus tells his disciples that he must be killed so that after three days he might rise from the dead. And the disciples just don't get it. Peter, Peter the one who is known for rushing in, Peter takes hold of Jesus to deny the teaching: "Lord, No. Lord, this cannot be. Lord, we won't let this happen." But Jesus, Jesus calls Peter Satan or, at least, infers that he is led by Satan. Jesus sternly corrects Peter: "Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts." Jesus was called by God to, among other things, die for us; and so it must be.

But next comes the most difficult part. Jesus calls the crowd together, and he tells them, "My task is difficult. I will die on a cross for the sake of the Gospel. But you, if you wish to follow me, you must also be willing to take up a cross, to lose your life, to give up all for the sake of the Good News." Friends, that's a tall order; but it's not easy being a Christian.

Our lectionary for today pairs this lesson with the story of God's covenant with Abram. The covenant. . . walk with me, follow my way, and I will bless you and your descendents. You see, as far back as Abram, God is calling humanity to follow, to walk in "the way," to lead the life that God would have us lead. And then, God outwardly recognized that Abram and his wife Sarai will be different; and as a sign of that difference, he assigned them new names – Abraham and Sarah. Friends, I sincerely hope, that by virtue of being a Christian, you are different from the rest of the people in our society.

I have told you before my story about Brother Price, but I think it bears repeating at this time. For many years I worked in downtown Cleveland, and daily I would walk across Public Square from the bus stop to my office; and, almost every day I would pass this sidewalk preacher honking on an old beat-up

saxophone and shouting at the passers-by. “You there,” he would shout, “you need Jesus. You in all make-up, you need Jesus. You in the \$300 dollar suit and the Italian leather shoes, you need Jesus.” And daily, I would take a wide berth around this fellow. But, over time, my curiosity began to peak. This fellow was different from other sidewalk preachers I’d seen. For one thing, he was always there, rain or shine or snow, he was there honking out some hymn on his saxophone and shouting at the people. But more than that, there seemed to be sincerity about his message that was somehow different from others I had seen.

So one day, my curiosity got the best of me, and I walked right up to him and said, “Hello.”

“Hello there,” he replied, “What’s your name?”

“Me? My name is Mark,” I answered, “And you?”

“I’m Brother Price,” he said.

“Brother. . .?”

“Brother Price, just remember the price Jesus paid for our sins and you’ll remember me. I’m Brother Price.”

“I’m pleased to meet you Brother Price.”

“I’m pleased to meet you to, Mark.” he answered. “Tell me, Mark, do you know Jesus?”

“Do I know Jesus, how do I answer that?” I thought. So, not wanting to get into a major Christological discussion on Public Square, I simply said, “I know Jesus to be my Lord and Savior.”

“Oh then you’re a Christian, Mark”

“Yes, yes, I’m a Christian.”

“Where do you work, Mark?”

“Oh I work for the RTA,” I responded, still being careful not to give out too much personal information.

Then Brother Price asked me what might be the most significant question anyone has ever asked me. He said, “Tell me, Mark, do the folks there at the RTA know you’re a Christian; do they know you’re a Christian by the way you live?”

Not do they know I’m a Christian because I tell them about my church. Not do they know I’m a Christian because I have a Bible on my desk. Not do they know I’m a Christian because I sometimes wear a cross. Do folks know I’m a Christian, by the way I live?

I responded, “I pray they do, Brother Price. I pray they do”; and we had prayer together right there in the middle of Public Square.

And so, I ask you the same question, “Do folks know you’re a Christian by the way you live?”

When Abram entered into a covenant with God, he became a different person; so different that God gave him a new name. And Jesus tells us, if we're going to follow him, we will be different, our lives will be different, our priorities will be different. Indeed the love of God, and our service to God must come before all else, even life itself. It's not always easy being a Christian.

Now, I have said before and I say again, we are all very blessed to be living in the United States of America. None of us is risking our lives by simply declaring that we are Christians; and there are many places in this world where that is not the case. But that having been said, being a Christian does often mean taking an "unpopular" stand on issues. It's not always popular to stand up for the poor, the downtrodden, or the immigrant.

I have repeatedly spoken out against government and societal actions that negatively effect those less fortunate than ourselves; and that has not always been popular, but I note that the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church clearly support such a stand. More importantly, I believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ supports such a stand. If I have a problem with our denomination, and I love the United Methodist Church, don't get me wrong, but, if I have a problem with our denomination it's that we have not been vocal enough about the stand we take regarding the poor, the downtrodden, religious minorities, and immigrant rights.

But the way we live as Christians is not just a matter of what we say. It is all about priorities. I remember being in a theology class with a third order Benedictine. Now being in the third order does not make him a priest; in fact, he was married with a family. However, being in the third order does mean that he has taken certain vows of devotion and spiritual practice. He once told me, "My children do not go hungry. My children do get new clothes, and some toys; but nothing is over the top. We live in a modest home. I drive a modest car. I don't wear \$50 shirts or \$200 dollar shoes, and we give all we can, within reason, to charity."

Well, my wife, Ginny, and I live fairly modestly, unless you count the amount of money we spend traveling or the investment we make in musical instruments. And I struggle with that. The Biblical mandate is to give 10% as a tithe to the church. We do that, and more; but Jesus said, "Sell *all you have*, give the money to the poor; then come and follow me." Yes, it's hard to be a Christian. I struggle when I look at the needs of the world; and I ask if I should be spending more time in the mission field. Jesus calls us to serve the lost and the least.

Yes, I struggle with the call of Christ. It's not easy being Christian. But, having said all this, please don't hear negativity in my struggles. I find joy in the midst of my struggles. I find joy in being a Christians; because, in the midst of my

struggles, I celebrate a loving God. I celebrate a loving Christ who loves me so much that he was willing to take up a cross for me. In that there is great joy!

I have stated before, that my ultimate desire is to so live my life that folks will know I am a Christian. I want folks to look at me and say, "He must be a Christian, and it must be good to be a Christian." So I hope I never stop the struggling, and I pray that I never stop the celebrating, as I give God all the praise and all the glory.

Let us pray. . .

Lead us Lord.

It's not always easy being Christian,
and still we know that you walk beside us,
that you support and guide us,
that you show us the way.

So, give us the courage to follow,
with love and joy and peace.

Amen.

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