

“Determine Your Priorities”

In today’s passage from Mark 8:31-38, Jesus offers what appears an odd statement. “All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them.” This is in fact a core statement of Christian ethics. It goes to the question of where we place our priorities as Christians. What does it mean?

In the scripture today, Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the scribes and eventually be killed and then will rise from the dead. These statements are both incredible and unbelievable to his followers. Peter has just declared Jesus to be the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah. The disciples consider Jesus to be the long sought for Messiah, but Jesus’ words do not fit with that conception of the Messiah. All their lives they had been taught and thought of the Messiah in terms of irresistible conquest and now they are presented with an idea that staggered them. This is why Peter protested so strongly. To him what Jesus was saying was impossible.

Why did Jesus so strongly rebuke Peter? Because Jesus had to teach the disciples what Messiah really meant. And because Peter was putting into words the very temptations that were bombarding Jesus at that moment. The human part of Jesus did not want to die. Jesus knew he had powers he could use for conquest. He

was reliving the battles of temptations in the wilderness. The devil was tempting him again to fall down and worship him, to make him take his way instead of God's way. Satan is trying to speak through Peter, and this is why Jesus rebukes him.

As the commentator William Barclay discusses, it a strange and sometimes a terrible thing that the tempter speaks to us in the voice of a well-meaning friend or family member. We may have decided on a course for God which is the right course but will ultimately bring loss, unpopularity, or sacrifice. At that moment, a well-meaning friend may come to us and try, with the best intentions in the world, to stop us with, "remember, you have a wife and a family. You can't do this." You don't want to stick your neck out for social justice. You don't want to be part of efforts to make needed changes in society. Play it safe.

It is very possible for someone to love you so much that they want you to avoid trouble at all cost. The tempter can make no more terrible attack than when the attacks are in the voice of those who love you and who think they seek only our good. This is what happened to Jesus that day. Peter loved Jesus and thought he was doing the right thing by correcting him. This is why Jesus spoke so sternly and so clearly. Not even the pleading of the voice of love must silence the voice of God we must hear and follow.

Jesus was very honest with his disciples. He did not offer them the easy way. He does not offer us the easy way. He offers us ultimate glory in Heaven. What he offered was a great challenge to people, to waken the sleeping courage in their souls. To tell a person that he must be ready to take up a cross is to tell him he must be ready to be regarded as a criminal and die. He offered them a way that could be higher and harder. He did not come to make life comfortable but to make it great. The great example here is that Jesus never called upon people to do or face anything he was not prepared to do and face himself. Jesus has the right to call upon us to take up the cross for he himself actually bore the cross and died on it.

Jesus said of the person who would be his disciple, "Let him deny himself." For a person to be Jesus' disciple, one must say yes to Christ and say no to his own natural love of ease and comfort. A disciple must say no to every action which is based on self-seeking and self-will. A disciple must say no to the desires which prompt him to touch and taste the forbidden things. A disciple must no longer follow his own will, but must follow the will of Christ, and in that service will find perfect freedom.

Jesus offers us a choice. We can live life carefully, husbanding life, always thinking of our own profit, ease, comfort and security. Our sole aim can be to make life long and as trouble-free as possible. We can make all our efforts just for

ourselves. But what does this accomplish for eternity? Jesus says if we live like this, we are really losing life all the time.

If we spend our life for others, if we forget time and wealth and comfort in our desire do something for Jesus and the people for whom Jesus died, we are winning life all the time. Think of what self-sacrifice has done for humanity. What would have happened to the world if the doctors and scientists and inventors had not been prepared to risk experiments, often on their own bodies? What about the sacrifice of those who were explorers or pioneers? What would happen if every mother refused to take the risk of bearing a child? As Barclay observes, the very essence of life is in risking life, not in saving it and hoarding it.

One of my favorite television shows ever is *Star Trek*. I watched the original run of the television series as a child and have watched all the subsequent series and movies. About a week ago I once again watched an episode called *City on the Edge of Forever*, considered the greatest show in *Star Trek* history. Dr. McCoy has accidentally injected himself with an overdose of a drug and has gone mad. He beams himself down to a planet. A landing party goes down to find him. He gets away from them and runs through a time portal. This time machine can take someone to anytime in history. When he goes through the portal, the landing party

realizes McCoy has changed history, mainly because their starship in orbit has disappeared.

Captain Kirk and his first officer Mr. Spock go through the time portal to find McCoy and determine what he has done to change history. Mr. Spock is able to figure out how to return about a week before McCoy will show up in 1930s New York. The story is about how Kirk and Spock integrate themselves into the depression culture of New York. They make friends, get jobs, and research what is going on. Mr. Spock, with his great intellect, improvises and builds a computer out of vacuum tubes and 1930s technology.

In the course of their stay in the past Captain Kirk falls in love with a social worker, Edith Keeler, played by the actress Joan Collins. Although Kirk was known to have girlfriends during the *Star Trek* series, this was the only time he truly fell in love.

With his computer, Spock figures out what has happened. Edith became such a prominent social worker that she actually met with President Roosevelt in 1936. As a pacifist, she becomes so influential that she convinces the President and Congress to delay the United States' entry into World War II. Unfortunately, this gives Germany the time to develop nuclear weapons and Hitler and the Nazis win the war, take over the world, and change humanity for the worse forever. But Edith

was supposed to have been killed in 1930 by getting hit by a bus when she was crossing the street. McCoy, in his coming back through time, saved her.

Kirk is now faced with a terrible ethical choice. Will he be willing to give up the woman he loves for the good of humanity? He must balance his personal freedom against the good of the community. He watches on the street corner as Edith crosses the street, with the bus about to hit her. McCoy then comes out of the time portal, sees Edith and rushes out to save her. What will Kirk do? He grabs McCoy, holds him and watches the love of his life die. Kirk may not have sacrificed his own life, but he sacrificed the life he cared about the most.

What are we willing to prioritize in life to follow Christ? This past year of our global pandemic and efforts for social justice has taught us that we must be willing to adjust our personal freedoms and comforts of life in order to help others. Our ability to spend our lives for others and engage in self-sacrifice is made even more difficult in our society in which personal freedoms are so valued.

But it can be done. And we often engage in the change we need to take by improvising. Think of the improvising done by Mr. Spock in *Star Trek*. The pirate is one we often think of when we imagine an improviser. Yes, pirates are criminals and steal and might even kill during their exploits. But we celebrate them in our culture. Sports teams such as the Pittsburgh Pirates in baseball and the Las Vegas

Raiders and Tampa Bay Buccaneers in football are admired. In comedy, John Belushi, as his Belushiest, was loved as a pirate.

As discussed by MaryAnn McKibben Dana in *Christian Century* magazine, when she speaks to church groups, she asks, “Who was Jesus’ best pirate?” Many groups answer instantly with one voice: Peter. Yes, it was Peter who Jesus had to rebuke, but it was also Peter whom Jesus chose to build his church on. You have to admire Peter’s willingness to argue with Jesus, not to be calm and not just give in to the norm. It took nerve to do what he did.

Look at what Peter did. When he tries to rebuff Jesus for washing his feet and Jesus chastises him, he changes his tune. “*Ok, Jesus, wash my whole body instead.*” Who stepped out of the boat and walked towards Jesus? When the disciples are fishing together after the resurrection and see Jesus standing on the beach, it was Peter who jumps into the water and swims in to meet him, rather than just taking the boat ashore. It was Peter whom God chose to use to take the gospel to the Gentiles in Acts 10 when he went to Cornelius’ home. It was Peter who was ultimately crucified on the cross upside down for his faith, the cross he so harshly objected to in Mark 8.

In closing today, as we reflect on the oddness of this statement that all who lose their lives because of Jesus and for the sake of the good news will save their

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lives, we need to focus on sacrifice for others and the improvising it takes to fulfill this ethic of Jesus. As we balance personal freedom versus our commitment to our fellow human beings, let us think of a statement by Richard Rohr, noted author of daily meditations, “Real solidarity needs to be felt and suffered. That’s the real meaning of the word ‘suffer’---to allow someone else’s pain to influence us in a way. We need to move beyond our own personal feelings and take in the whole. Self-improvement has its place, but Jesus promises us something much deeper, it we’re willing to give ourselves to it.”