

Learning to Follow Jesus

Mark 8:27-38

Rev. Peter James, Vienna Presbyterian Church, Vienna, VA

Sunday, July 30, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

May now the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

At a seminary, a local chef was upset that the seminarians came through the lunch line took more than their share of oranges out of the bowl. So the chef decided he would place a sign by the bowl of oranges that read, "Jesus is watching you!" Well, a little farther down the lunch line was a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies and one enterprising seminarian decided to place a hastily prepared sign of his own. His sign read, "Take as many cookies you want; Jesus is back there watching the oranges."

I want to talk about Jesus today, and with you I want to answer three central questions. Who is Jesus, What is his mission, and What does he demand of us.

First: Who is Jesus? I invite you to turn to Mark, chapter 8, beginning at verse 27. You can follow right along with this story. Verse 27 tells us that Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Caesarea Philippi, one of the northern most provinces of the Roman Empire. And they are far away from Jerusalem as Jesus asks them a question. He says, "Who do people say that I am?"

In verse 28, they answer, "Well, some say you are John the Baptist, others say you are Elijah the prophet." You remember he had an unusual exit from this earth. "And some say you are one of the prophets." Next verse, Jesus intensifies the question, "What about you, who do you say that I am?" And Peter, impetuous Peter, who sometimes gets it wrong, this time, nails it. He says, "You are the Christ." Now Christ is not Jesus' last name. If you would open a first century phone book, it would not be listed as Christ, Jesus. It's a title. Literally it reads, Jesus the Christ. The Greek word is Christos and the Hebrew word is even more revealing, it's Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah, which literally means the anointed one of God. In those days Kings were anointed, and Jesus is the anointed one of God. Who is Jesus? He is the Messiah, the anointed one of God.

Second question: What is his mission? Jesus seizes on Peter's confession of "You are the Messiah." Now look at verse 31 with me. Jesus, began to teach them that the son of man must undergo great suffering; be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, the scribes; and be killed; and after three days, rise again.

Jesus' mission is unambiguous, it is to die. One third of the gospel of Mark is about the last week in Jesus' life. One third. Last summer I read the David Donalds biography of Abraham Lincoln, six hundred pages, and of the six hundred pages on Abraham Lincoln, six deal with his death. Only six. Clearly one third of the gospel of Mark and almost one half of all the gospels, deal with the last week of Jesus' life. One of the theologians of the Early Church said that essentially the gospels are passion narratives with a long introduction. Jesus' mission is to die, not only to live. Let me explain it to you this way. Let's suppose there is a breach between you and me. There is separation, something's happened in the relationship between us. It's incumbent either upon me or you to do something to heal the breach. Now take that forward — the Bible says there is a breach between God and humanity. That breach is the result of human sin — and either it's incumbent upon God or humanity to heal the breach. The scripture says because humanity is caught in sin, this is the work of God to heal the breach.

So God comes in the person of Christ to eliminate sin and usher us back into relationship with God. Who is Jesus? He's Messiah, the anointed one of God and what is his mission? His mission is to die for us on the cross. And what does he demand of us? I invite you one more time back to the text, verse 34. Jesus speaks, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." What does Jesus demand of us? He demands us to follow. The word disciple literally means a follower, in fact you'll notice the sentence is constructed, if any of you want to become my follower, you must follow.

I went out to dinner last night, the maitre d' said, "Follow me," and I followed him to my seat. And Jesus calls us to follow. The word disciple means pupil, learner, or apprentice. I like that word apprentice. Apprentice learns the trade from a master. That's really what we are, we are life long apprentices for Jesus Christ. That's the title of the sermon. We are people learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus. What does he demand of us? He demands us to follow. Who is Jesus? He's Messiah. And what is his mission? To die for our sins. And what does he demand of us? He demands us to follow.

The name that we most commonly associate with ourselves, is not the name disciple, the name we most commonly associate with ourselves is Christian. Christian. Now there is biblical precedent for it because in the book of Acts, chapter 11, the followers, or disciples of Jesus, are first called Christians. When the followers of Jesus could no longer be called Hebrews, Jews, they were somewhat derisively called Christians. Now you will find the name or title Christians three times in the bible. Twice in Acts and once in the letter of Peter. Three times. That's all you will find the title Christian. The title disciple, you will find that 269 times in the New Testament. One of you will count them, I know, you will check me out, make sure I'm right. The preferred identification of early followers of Jesus was the word disciple. What is a disciple? A disciple is an apprentice. A life-long apprentice — that's what we are. We are learning all our lives to follow Jesus.

It's been my experience that the name Christian, sometimes is someone who ascribes to certain set of beliefs, such as what we did this morning, appropriately enough, confirming the Apostles Creed. And sometimes we did it as though as it is just a thought and a belief system. But a Christian is a disciple, a Christian is one who follows. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus. Here is the question for you and me. How then is it possible, you tell me, how is it possible for someone to be a Christian and not

make any real progress to becoming a disciple.

Discipleship, as I read the bible, is not optional. It is what is demanded of us for the price that was paid on our behalf. I would suspect if you go out to streets this afternoon and you would ask people, what is your impression of Jesus? My impression is that most people would be rather positive about Jesus. Now if you go out on the street and you ask those same people, what is your impression of the church? The reaction I suspect will not be quite as positive. So maybe Christians are not acting much like disciples.

I was walking in our community several months ago, and I saw a young man with a T-shirt that read, "Jesus is my home-boy." I couldn't believe it, I sort of walked around him to get a look at this again. I looked at the T-shirt again, and, sure enough, "Jesus is my home-boy," which is urban slang for friend. A couple of days later I saw another young person with "Jesus is my home-boy." By this time I was very curious, so I googled the phrase, Jesus is my home-boy. And I found that this slogan originates with a company in California, of course, called teenage millionaires, and by the way they also have another T-shirt that reads Mary is my home-girl.

This by the way is the most popular selling T-shirt, millions of T-shirts have been sold with this slogan and all sorts of paraphernalia. And when a company spokesman was asked about that he said, "Well, we researched the pop icons of the 21st century and Jesus tops the list. 21st century pop icons, Jesus tops the list. There's something about Jesus that in the lives of younger people today is really attracting them.

An avowed atheist once said "Christians will need to act more like Christ if I am to become a Christian." The greatest witness for Christ is Christians. The greatest witness against Jesus Christ is also Christian. In 1998 the church I serve opened a new sanctuary. We needed a larger sanctuary to accommodate the people worshiping with us, the right kind of problem for a church to have. And we had a precipitous rise in worship attendance in that first year. And people began to ask me, "What is our mission?" What is our mission? And I thought to myself, why are they asking me this, isn't it obvious, our mission is the same since 1874, follow Jesus.

But I think what was really happening was they were concerned about our church just getting bigger and bigger. So the leadership decided we needed a core mission, and we came up with the slogan, "A disciple-making church." And what we want to do in our lives and in the leadership of the church is hold disciple-making like a plumb line against everything we do in the church. Now the language of disciple-making is taken from Matthew 28, in what is called the Great Commission. "Go and make disciples." Now technically, you don't make anyone a disciple -- that's God work. But we want to participate in God's work of making disciples out of our own lives and those entrusted to us. So people said, okay, disciple-making. What does that mean? So we came up with seven covenants for practices of being a disciple-making church and being disciple-makers.

The first three of the seven all had to do with spiritual discipline: pray daily, worship continually, and study regularly. Prayer, worship, and study are the basic practices of a Christian life, something we do individually and together. The fourth covenant is live faithfully. We place that in the middle position among the seven because our primary mandate is to live in covenant faithfulness with God. And the last three, serve creatively, give generously, and witness boldly, are the practical working out of our faith.

There's a Mercedes Benz commercial in which a car collides into a wall, which caused me a little pain to see this beautiful automobile crashed into the wall. But after the car crashes into the wall, a company spokesman is asked the question, "Why don't you have a patent on the energy body that has this ability to absorb and to create such an ability to resist the crash. Why don't you have a patent on it? And do you remember? The company spokesman says, "Because some things are too important not to share."

Discipleship is not optional, it is not possible to be a Christian without making progress toward becoming a disciple. This church, my friends, is poised. You've got the right leadership here, Mike, Doug, Jean, Junior, Gareth. They are good people, I tell you. I know some of your leaders, and they're good people. It's a good church. Can you imagine what would happen if everyone here took seriously this call to be a disciple.

Let us pray. O Lord, bless this congregation. Bless its leaders, its staff. Bless its people. Lord, some of us today are hearing your call to become disciples, maybe there are those here today who are hearing this call for the first time, to follow you with their lives. And so some of us today want to acknowledge you as Savior and endeavor to follow you as Lord of our lives. Some of us here have heard this call before, but we've gotten side-tracked; we need to come back. O Lord, bless this church, bless its leaders, bless its people. Rain down your Holy Spirit upon this congregation, that we might be your witnesses for your great love in the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.