

“When Stepping Behind Is Moving Forward”

Scripture: Mark 8:31-9:1

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Mark 8:31-9:1

<sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But 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.”

<sup>34</sup> He 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. <sup>35</sup> For 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. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those 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.” **9**<sup>1</sup> And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

There is an old proverb that goes, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” What this proverb captures is that every so often we are not ready to learn, so any teaching goes right by us. The question is when are we ready to learn?

When I was 15 years old, I was ready to drive...not ready to learn to drive, you understand, ready to drive! I didn't know as much as I thought I did. When I was 22, I was ready to marry and I did. When I was 23, then I really began to learn what it means to be ready for marriage!

“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” The word “student” is just another word for one of our church words: “disciple.” A disciple is one who is ready and wanting to learn. So we can baptize that proverb and say: “When the disciple is ready, the Teacher will appear.” Teacher with a capital T!

Let me give my testimony to a teachable moment for me this past Friday—when I attended the funeral of Anne Sanford—Anne, the wife of Shelton Sanford, the senior pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. What a wonderful and gracious woman! The service could have been all about the loss...the loss to the family, to that congregation, and to this community. However, instead of majoring on the loss—and the loss is great—the service was all about being a witness, about being a disciple of Jesus Christ. The writer Fredrich Buechner has said that the Gospel is bad news before it is good news...it is tragic before it is comic...it is death before it is life. I can only in some small way imagine the loss for the Sanfords right now. Projecting my own feelings on them, I sense that the gospel has been bad news before it is good news...tragic before it is comic...death before it is life. And so perhaps it was only me that garbled out the last line of closing hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” But I think I heard other swallow deeply and voice that last line. We voiced what we knew through constricted throats:

Let goods and kindred go  
This mortal life also.  
The body, they may kill.  
God's truth abideth still.  
His kingdom is forever.

A teachable moment...at least for me.

Our text today is a teachable moment for Jesus' students, his disciples. Our text says that Jesus "began to teach" those who were with him—specifically, his "disciples." He "began to teach them," because they were ready...or so it seemed. He had just asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter had answered for all them: "You are the Christ." Or, "You are the Messiah." The word "Christ" is just the Greek version of the Hebrew word, Messiah. They both mean the same thing: "Anointed." To be "The Anointed One" was big. Prophets were anointed. Kings were anointed. Priests were anointed. All these "anointed ones" were God's servants. But "The Anointed One" was way beyond every prophet, king, or priest. Peter was saying, "You are the one who can show us God...you can show us what we are called to be...you can give us life."

Now the disciples are ready...they can say without hesitation who Jesus is. And most of us can do that. Who is Jesus? Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the one who died for our sins. Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Instead running ads saying "Got Milk?" we could run ads saying, "Got Jesus?" When we can say who Jesus is, we are ready.

So Jesus began to teach them: "Here's what it looks like to be God's anointed." And the disciples are ready to hear...but what are they ready to hear? They are ready to hear that discipleship has privileges. They are ready to hear that "Good things are coming our way...God is going to treat us like members of the country club." Membership will have its privilege. I think the disciples would have been ready to sing that old camp song, "Every day with Jesus is sweeter than day before."

But what Jesus began to teach did not sound anything like what they thought they would hear. To be God's anointed means to go to Jerusalem and be rejected...despised...to be cruelly treated and die on a cross and be raised on the third day. Sure, Jesus mentioned be "raised," but all that other stuff obscured what was being said. They couldn't hear about the resurrection...they were stuck on that rejection, cruelty, and death part. They could not consider Easter when Good Friday loomed in their face.

So...Peter takes Jesus aside and sets him straight. That's not what it means to be God's Anointed. We are supposed to win...we are supposed to be the champions...we are supposed to get the good stuff. The text says that Peter "took" Jesus. This verb "take" is what a parent does with a child: you take a child. You don't say to the 1 year old, "Honey, would you please go to the doctor and get your vaccinations?" You take a child to the doctor for the vaccination. You don't say to a six-year old child, "Let's talk about whether you go to the first grade or not." You take the child to school.

Peter took Jesus and rebuked him. Rebuke—that's a good church word. I am not sure I hear the word "rebuke" anywhere but in the church. Let's put that in language we understand: Peter scolded Jesus...he gave Jesus "the what for"...he gave Jesus a "tongue lashing." What has happened here is that Peter has moved out to the role of disciple or learner. Peter has moved into the role of teacher and

master. How often we resist learning because we assume that we are in charge...that we are in control.

So Jesus calls the disciples and even the crowd to hear what is said next. Jesus teaches: we give up being in charge...we deny self. Giving up self...not some thing. And no one says that it is easy—to give up self...it is just necessary for disciples.

You may have heard the story of the old-order Mennonite family that gave up every convenience for the sake of the gospel. They lived simply—no electricity, no indoor plumbing, no frills. They practiced faithful living. They dressed in the plainest of clothes. One Sunday the father got home from church and said: “I do believe we were the plainest dressed people in worship today!” Plainest dressed people of all—the self can still be in control even when giving up things!

The gift of the self is difficult in discipleship. Every year as the Officer Nominating Committee gets going, they struggle with how to address a particular part of discipleship: a member’s contribution record. Now, no nominating committee ever gets numbers, but they do find out whether a member makes a pledge and fulfills that pledge on a regular basis. And what many nominating committees find out is that we have church members with very evident gifts for leadership, very devoted attachment to this congregation, and very clearly disciples of Jesus Christ...but they do not fit that criterion of making a pledge and reasonably completing it on a regular basis (not the one “bad” year as such—but on a regular basis).

Now for those that meet their pledge, there is often this knee-jerk reaction of “What’s wrong with them?” And sometimes it’s my knee that jerks! But you see, that’s not my particular cross to bear. Making a pledge and fulfilling is really not hard for me...for many of you—we would even think of not doing it. But that’s me...that’s many of you. Be thankful it is not hard for you...it is very difficult for some among us. What is absolute is this: the gift of the self is difficult for all of us. The gift of money may not be our particular struggle...but we all have those places where the self seeks to be in charge.

Now the nominating committee has to make a decision whether to nominate members to be officers in this congregation; officers who, among many other things, will make budgetary decisions...financial decisions. Most nominating committees follow the guidelines adopted by the Session some years back—officers need to both pledge and reasonably complete that pledge. But there is another side to discipleship issues. Periodically, someone tell me that they have not been coming to worship but they are still making their pledge...they are sending their money. On the one hand, that is very admirable and much appreciated. On the other hand, it always reminds me of one minister’s response to that assurance. When a member would say, “I just don’t come to worship, pastor, but I am sending my money.” The minister’s response would be, “We don’t want your money...we want you.”

The gift of our self...it always involves sacrifice, and none of us are there yet. What teachable moments are ahead for you and me? What is going to get us to set self aside and follow Jesus?

Sometimes the pain gets to us—it’s amazing what we will put up with until the pain gets us to change.

Sometimes it is the crisis—in an extreme situation, we begin to say: I am beginning to get it.

Sometimes we are seeking—we are open to have God reach us. And God meets us where we are searching.

Sometimes the way of discipleship simply bumps right into us: an opportunity, a possibility, a moment of grace. And we give ourselves over to it.

But here's my conviction: Jesus does not ask for a nod of the head...Jesus does not ask for a tip...there is no matter of putting my foot in to test the water before diving in...Jesus asks for all. And there is a twofold promise—first, you will find your life in giving your life. Here is the paradoxical logic of the gospel: you only find life by giving life away. And we just keep forgetting that.

In some ways, perhaps a very shallow way, it's like physical exercise: when you first get started, it is hard...it is painful...it is no fun. But once you get started, you find you breathe better, your muscles feel better, you sleep better, and you have more energy. But how hard it is to get started, to give yourself over to it. The results of giving ourselves away are not immediately evident...this is not about “instant gratification.”

I have always been impressed by the story of Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch woman who sought to rescue Jews from being captured by the Nazis in World War II. She and her sister were caught and sent off to prison for hiding Jews. In prison, Corrie and her sister tried to practice that understanding of the apostle Paul of being thankful in all things.

Corrie tells being able to be thankful for a lot of difficult things but she could never be thankful for the lice. She said to her sister: there is nothing about lice for which to be thankful. Only after the war and after she was free did she come to find out that in prisons where there was no problem with lice, the women prisoners were often abused and mistreated in the worst physical way. It turns out that the lice had protected them from another form of suffering. Being thankful in all things—there is no instant gratification there.

But there is second promise. It is that threat of shame. It is a threat...you can't hide from it. Jesus says: “Those 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.” I must confess to being enough “other driven” that I do enjoy being “pleasing to others”—not to be shameful. I do not want to live in a way that would cause Jesus to be ashamed.

Back when I was graduate student at Duke University and working part-time at the First Presbyterian Church of Durham, I got to know one of the older members of the congregation—a man by the name of Carl Shock. Carl Shock had been great football player in his day—back in the 1930's. He had played football for the revered Duke coach named Wallace Wade. The football stadium at Duke is named after Wallace Wade.

Carl Shock casually told me a story about the importance of Wallace Wade in his life, not just when he was playing football, but for his adult life as well. Thirty years after graduating from Duke, in the mid-sixties, Wallace Wade was at Sloan-Kettering Hospital in New York City. He had been diagnosed with a very severe form of cancer. It was unlikely that he would live. The treatment could well be very costly for his family. Carl was up high in this hospital, above 20<sup>th</sup> floor. Knowing that the treatment

would be hard and could potentially bankrupt his family and could all go for nothing, Carl opened the hospital window. He reasoned that if he jumped out, he would surely be killed. He felt like his wife would understand...he felt like his family would understand...he put a knee up on the window sill...he felt like God would understand. And Wallace Wade? Wallace would not understand! Carl Shock put his foot back on the floor and got in bed. Twenty years later, he is telling this story to a slack-jawed graduate student named William Pender! Carl Shock could not live...or die...with Wallace Wade being ashamed of him! And so he lived!

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The call of discipleship keeps coming: there are teachable moments all around us and ahead for us. Got Jesus? Then let's learn!