**Mark 8:31-38**

J.B. Phillips New Testament (PHILLIPS)

**Jesus speaks of the future and of the cost of discipleship**

31-33 And he began to teach them that it was inevitable that the Son of Man should go through much suffering and be utterly repudiated by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He told them all this quite bluntly. This made Peter draw him on one side and take him to task about what he had said. But Jesus turned and faced his disciples and rebuked Peter. “Out of my way, Satan!” he said. “Peter, you are not looking at things from God’s point of view, but from man’s!”

34-38 Then he called his disciples and the people around him, and said to them, “If anyone wants to follow in my footsteps, he must give up all right to himself, take up his cross and follow me. The man who tries to save his life will lose it; it is the man who loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s who will save it. What good can it do a man to gain the whole world at the price of his own soul? What can a man offer to buy back his soul once he has lost it? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in the Father’s glory with the holy angels around him.”

**“Six Big Ideas for Lent”**

A Sermon by Don Cummings

Grace Church, Buena Vista, Colorado

March 4, 2012

Today’s reading from the gospel of Mark (Mark 8:31-38) lays out in short order six big ideas that dominate our thinking during the season of Lent because they are five key concepts of the gospel.

1. Jesus announces to his disciples that he must suffer and die though he will rise to life again on the third day. This was a new and hard teaching by Jesus that shocked his disciples because it was so out of synch with the expectations of the future they held for Jesus.
2. Jesus highlights the error of setting our minds on human things instead of divine things. That’s the way the NRSV puts it. J.B. Phillips paraphrased it this way: “Peter, you are not looking at things from God’s point of view, but from man’s.” Here Jesus is saying that in life there are two points of view to choose from and which point of view we choose is critical.
3. Jesus spells out the cost of discipleship. Anyone who wants to be a follower of his must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him.
4. Jesus reveals the great paradox of the gospel: If you try to save your life, you’ll lose it, but if you lose your life for Jesus’s sake and for the sake of the gospel, you’ll save it. This paradox is related to self-denial.
5. Jesus warns his followers about a terrible danger: you can gain the whole world, but it will be at the cost of your own soul, and once you’ve lost your soul, what can you offer to buy it back?
6. Jesus alerts his followers to a temporal decision with eternal consequences. If we are ashamed of Christ and his teachings here and now, he will be ashamed of us when he comes in the Father’s glory attended by the holy angels.

Each of these big ideas

is very important to our understanding

of the Christian life.

But one of them is actually the connective tissue that holds all the rest of them together, and it is the one that Jesus himself models for us.

That one big idea is self-denial, the giving up of all right to one’s self.

What Jesus told his disciples would happen to him represented the giving up of all rights to his own self, his own desires and hopes that he enacted in the Garden of Gethsemane when on the stone of agony he prayed “Not my will, but thine be done.”

He said, if we are to follow him, we must pray that prayer too. And though giving up our will to God’s will may seem like a loss to us, it is really the only way to gain real life. If we try to grasp our right to our self, to our life, to our soul, we will lose it. But if we give it up for Christ’s sake, we will save it.

This is one of the hardest things about the Christian faith for us to understand. What’s at stake here?

Let me say first that historically the church has struggled with the meaning of self-denial. Too often self-denial has been interpreted to mean death to one’s self, self-condemnation, self-immolation, self-hatred, poor self esteem, and other damaging, negative misunderstandings of what Jesus was talking about. These concepts have created a lot of damage in people’s lives. I am confident none of these things were what Jesus had in mind.

Let me share with you why I think this.

First of all, God created each and every one of us with a self. Our self is who we are. To eradicate self is to eradicate us. That’s not what God wants, nor what Jesus asked for.

But there is a problem with our selves. We have been born into a stew of fallen worldliness that from our birth has worked to turn our selves against God.

The way it has done this is to convince us that if we want to be happy and fulfilled in life we must tend to our own selfish interests above all others.

We must put Number One, meaning ourselves, first.

Playing along with this ruse, we put our selves first in our sibling rivalries,   
our friendships,   
our sports teams,   
our competitive businesses,   
our marriages, and   
even our religion.

What we want comes first.

It is this frantic vying to save our lives by getting what we want above all else that will cause us to lose everything that makes life meaningful.

Jesus knew that God created us to live in relationship with him. God wants our selves to know and to follow his will, because God’s will has our best interests at heart.

But this is not what the world wants. The world wants us to serve its systems, its values, its pursuit of happiness, it’s rebellious stance against God.

And so, we are faced every day with a cosmic choice: God’s way or the world’s way?   
A self that is compliant to God’s will   
 or the world’s will?   
Will I live for my self, controlled by my desires,   
 or will I live for God and others   
 controlled by God’s desire that I love him   
 and serve others”

What Jesus told his disciples that day amounts to this

(and may I personalize this for you?):

When there is a clash between strong wills:

your self-will vs. God’s will

your way vs. God’s way

thinking from your point of view vs.

God’s point of view

your chasing after the world vs. following Christ

Jesus said, anyone who desires to follow

me will choose God’s way.

You will lose your life for my sake.

You will give up all right to yourself,

your desires, your goals in life,

and you will pick up your cross, every day,

and follow me.

And in so doing, you will discover why God made you.

You will discover that God wants you

to have a strong and healthy self.

God made you to love you.

God made you with a vacuum in your heart

that only he can fill, and he wants to fill it.

You will discover that the only true happiness in life

comes when we lay aside our

self-centered cravings and follow God.

It is the difference between

a self that is compliant to the ways of the world

and a self that is compliant to the ways of God.

Jesus was not calling for an obliterated self to follow him

but rather a self submitted to God,

just as his own self was submitted to God.

So if you desire to follow Jesus,

take your self,

that part of you that is God’s precious gift

that part of you that makes you who you are,

and surrender it to God

to use as he will

in the work of his kingdom in this world.

Now there is a another thing Jesus said to his disciples

that day that is also hard for us to understand.

He said if we want to be his disciple,

we must pick up our cross every day

and follow him

What might this mean?

Jesus was executed by the state on his cross.

Is he calling for us to go out

and somehow and manage to get ourselves executed by the state?

The quick answer to this disturbing question is “No.”

This not what Jesus was asking of his followers

then or now.

For Jesus, the cross represented the ultimate

surrender of his self and his will to God’s will.

Death on a Roman cross for the redemption of humankind was his God-ordained destiny.

Jesus was sent by God to be the redeemer of the world.

Our God-ordained destiny

as followers of Jesus

is to continue the ministry of reconciliation

that God began in Christ.

Here’s the way the Apostle Paul put it:

**2 Corinthians 5:17-19**

New International Version (NIV)

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:[[a](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20Corinthians+5:17-19&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28895a)] The old has gone, the new is here! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

See, this is our God ordained destiny:

to proclaim the message of reconciliation

to God and to one another in Christ.

This is how God wants us to use our lives.

This is what it means to follow Jesus.

But what does this look like in daily life?

Are we supposed to stand on the street corner

and preach reconciliation to the passers by?

The quick answer to this disturbing question is also “No.”

So, what does it look like to surrender your self

and pick up your God-ordained destiny

and follow Christ by continuing

the ministry of reconciliation

God began in Jesus?

Brett Younger gives us one portrait of how Christ-followers pick up their crosses (Abingdon Preaching Annual 2012, p. 73):

“Our day-to-day decisions are not likely to lead to martyrdom, but each day we have to decide if we will give away our time and attention. Giving our lives away may mean

turning the other cheek,

standing with the people who are losing,

doing good that will receive no applause,

sitting in a home where someone has died,

treating discarded people as children of God,

shopping for someone else’s groceries,

baking cookies that we don’t eat,

reading stories to someone else’s children,

taking flowers to someone who is not our type,

visiting someone else’s mother in the nursing home,

watering someone else’s plants,

washing dishes we didn’t dirty,

discussing current events that don’t interest us,

talking about faith when we would rather be silent,

doing good for people who will do no good to us

in return,

weeping when others weep,

praying not for an easier life

but for strength to give our lives away

and discovering that if there is nothing

for which we would die,

then we don’t have enough for which to live.”

As you listened to this list,

did you wonder how some

of these ordinary acts of kindness

could really be equated to picking up a cross?

Well remember Jesus said

“Do unto others as you have them do unto you”

to people who lived in a world that taught

“Do it unto others before they

can do it unto you.”

Remember that he said in as much as we

clothe the naked, house the homeless,

visit the lonely and imprisoned,

and feed the hungry

we have done these acts of kindness unto him.

Remember that there is real power

in acts of kindness and reconciliation.

For two years after I retired

I would walk Cooper in the apartment complex

where Bonnie and I live in Brecksville, Ohio. We would walk past joggers, bike riders,

other dog walkers, neighbors going to and fro.

But seldom was there more than a nod, a wave,

or a “What kind of dog is that?”

Now I’ve spent my whole life in the church.

I have been in a small fellowship or study group

of one kind or another continuously

since high school.

But for those two years in the apartment

I experienced the loneliness of the world.

Oh, the nods and the waves and the dog talk

were all polite. But they were impersonal.

In two years not a single neighbor

invited us to dinner, dessert,

a Super Bowl party or any thing.

Not even a Tupperware party!

Now, I’m not complaining

and I’m not fishing for sympathy.

The point I want to make is that

in a lonely world acts of kindness and

reconciliation make a huge difference.

They are acts of self-denial

in so far as they require us to give away

our time and energy and resources

in service to others.

And they can be redemptive

when they help create an atmosphere of grace

in which God has a chance to do a deeper work

in someone’s heart and life.

Not all of our God-destiny cross bearing may be this easy.

We know that throughout history

Christians have been persecuted,

even martyred for their faith,

and that this kind of suffering of the faithful continues to this day.

Have you read the story about a trial court in [Iran](http://www.foxnews.com/topics/iran.htm#r_src=ramp) [that] has issued its final verdict, ordering a Christian pastor to be put to death for leaving [Islam](http://www.foxnews.com/topics/relationships/islam-religion.htm#r_src=ramp) and converting to [Christianity](http://www.foxnews.com/topics/relationships/christianity.htm#r_src=ramp), according to sources close to the pastor and his legal team.

Supporters fear Youcef Nadarkhani, a 34-year-old father of two who was arrested over two years ago on charges of apostasy, may now be executed at any time without prior warning, as death sentences in Iran may be carried out immediately or dragged out for years. [Just for converting to Christianity.]

Read more: <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/02/22/iran-court-convicts-christian-pastor-convert-to-death/#ixzz1o9d8sijK>

We often undervalue and fail to appreciate

the freedoms we have in America,

but stories like this one are repeated

throughout the world,

and many of our Christian brothers and sisters

suffer for the sake of Christ and the gospel

under repressive regimes and hostile cultures.

They suffer for continuing the ministry of

reconciliation in a world

that does not want to be reconciled.

Writing in the Abingdon Preaching Annual 2012,

Carl Schenck reminds us that

“When we suffer for others in the name of Christ,

redemption is possible.

[He reminds us that] There is a famous prayer

that was written by an unknown prisoner

in Ravensbruck concentration camp

and left next to the body of a dead child.

The prayer says,

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness. (Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* [San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992] p.224)

Then Schenck writes, “Let us pray that our suffering will never reach this extreme, but let us never forget that unmerited suffering can be redemptive.”

Such is the ministry of reconciliation.

So what will it be for you?

Your God-destiny of continuing

God’s ministry of reconciling the world

to himself in Christ, . . .

or another trip to the mall?