

sample sermon

THE CALLS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

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Focal Passage:
Mark 8:31-38

Introduction

Daniel Boone was a pioneer in the exploration and expansion of this country, and there is much legend and lore that surrounds his life. On one occasion he was asked if he had ever gotten lost. "Lost?" he replied, "No, I was never lost, but once I was bewildered for at least three days."

Our culture has not lost Jesus, but we are bewildered about him. For some, he is a brilliant teacher and philosopher about whom there is a collection of teachings much like those of Confucius, Socrates, or Plato. For others, Jesus is an ethical example, a man who lived a devout and holy life. For still others, Jesus is a social reformer, a liberator, a champion of the poor and the marginalized. For many Jesus is Savior, a divine/human figure, the one through whom God chose to save humankind.¹

It was that same way in Jesus' own time. Our Gospel lesson is a bridge that links two halves of Mark's Gospel. The first half deals with Jesus' teachings, healings, and preaching in Galilee; the second half, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

In the first paragraph of our lesson, Jesus takes a straw poll to decide what people are saying about him. "Who do people say that I am?" he asked his disciples. The answers are those we would expect: "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah or even one of the other prophets." Then Peter replied, "You are the messiah of God."

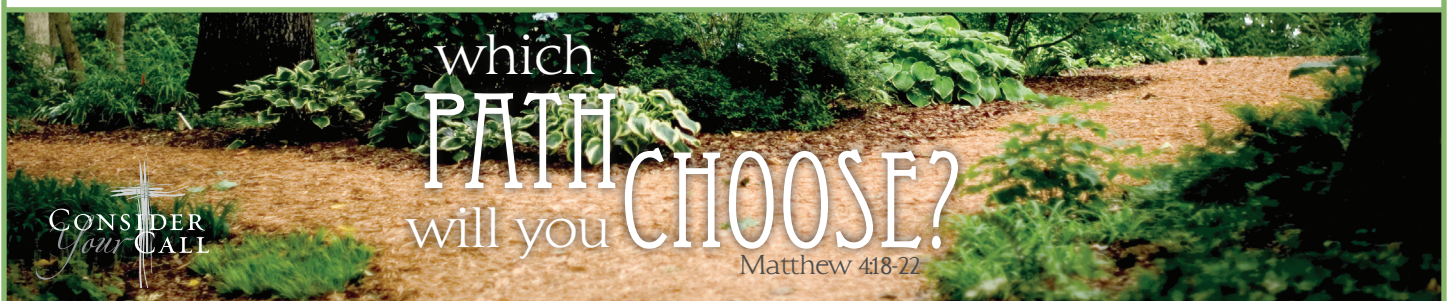
In the second paragraph, Jesus begins to teach his disciples the truth, to make matters clear about his mission and ministry, to eliminate all of the bewilderment that exists among his nearest and dearest followers. Jesus tells them that he will suffer and be rejected and will die. It is the truth with the bark still on it.

In the third paragraph, Jesus expands his audience to include the ubiquitous crowds. He tells these crowds about the humility, renunciation, and involvement necessary for a life of discipleship.

There are three calls of the Christian life found in our lesson.

I. The Call to Humility

The first is the call to humility. My initial impression of this account is not what Peter and the others understand about Jesus, but what they do not understand. Peter acknowledges that Jesus is the messiah, but clearly Jesus' concept of what that means is very, very different from Peter's. When Jesus talks about suffering, being rejected, and dying,



Simon Peter refuses to listen to Jesus and rebukes him. It is clear to us now that Simon Peter's understanding of Jesus is incomplete. Peter is like that student of geometry who gets the answer to the proof correct but who has no clue what steps it took to arrive at that correct answer. Worse, because he arrives at the correct answer, he mistakenly believes he knows geometry.

There are people who make the correct profession about Jesus but who have utterly no sense that there is much more to be understood about Jesus. They have only begun to understand the nuances of the Christian life. There is so much more to the mystery of the person of Jesus and what it means to follow him.

In his book *Finally Comes the Poet*, Walter Brueggemann quotes the Catholic writer Andrew Greeley: "The only real Jesus is the one who is larger than life, who escapes our categories, who eludes our attempts to reduce him for our cause. Any Jesus who has been made to fit our formula ceases to be appealing precisely because he is no longer wondrous, mysterious, and surprising. Categorize Jesus and he isn't Jesus anymore."² So the call to discipleship, because of our lack of understanding, is a call to humility.

On several occasions over the last decade I have gone hiking in the Grand Canyon, once for almost three days. I can tell you where the Grand Canyon is located; I can even give you directions how to get there. I can describe its features, but it remains to me a wonder and mystery. I could spend a lifetime hiking its trails and never explore all of its depths. I am humbled by its grandeur and its magnitude. So it is with the Christian life. To be joined with Jesus is to follow Jesus in the call to humility.

II. The Call to Renunciation

The second call is the call to renunciation and self-denial. The most memorable line in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *The Cost of Discipleship* is this: "When Christ calls a man, he calls him to come and die." Bonhoeffer's statement is no more blunt than the statement Jesus delivered to his disciples: "If anyone would be my follower, let him first deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

There is a *yes* to the Christian life; it is the *yes* to follow Jesus. But there is also a *no* to the Christian life.³ All of us spend our lives acquiring the strength to be able to say *no* to the wrong things in order to say *yes* to the right things.

Wayne Oates was a professor of pastoral care at the seminary I attended. He wrote a book entitled *Confessions of a Workaholic*. That term "workaholic" found its way into our popular culture. It was one of more than a dozen books Wayne Oates wrote during his lifetime. I remember an occasion in which a student asked Dr. Oates how he came to be able to write so many books, and Oates replied, "I go into my study, sit down in my chair, and resist the first 20 temptations to get up and do something else."

Life is about what we say *no* to as well as what we say *yes* to. Life involves sometimes saying *no* to people who drain our emotional resources, to events that steal our time and physical energy, to ideologies that are not worth our commitment and endorsement, to behaviors that lower our self-regard and compromise our reputations.

Many of the problems that our nation and world are enduring in these difficult days are the payback for our refusal to say *no*. We have said *yes* to loans we could not afford, *yes* to credit cards we could not back up with our cash, *yes* to a war we were willing to wage but weren't willing to pay for, *yes* to the immediate but *no* to the future and ultimate. Often it is easier to say *yes* than to say *no*, but there is an enormous freedom that comes when we learn to say *no*.

Four years ago my wife and I moved to a home a little closer to the church. The home we are in now is a little smaller than the one we were in before, and we had to jettison some of the stuff that we had acquired across the years. Unable to do that in the weeks we had to prepare for the move, we decided to rent a storage locker. The idea was that in a couple of months' time we would purge the furniture, boxes, and the mementos that we needed to toss. We are finally out of that storage locker. Last month was the first month we did not have to pay rent on that locker. We finally said *no* to all of the stuff, but it took almost four years. There is a freedom that comes with being able to say *no*.

It is also necessary to renounce some things in order to discover the freedom and joy of the Christian life. There is more to denial than just withholding from ourselves chocolate or caffeine or carbohydrates during the season of Lent. The kind of renunciation of which I speak is the renunciation of the self as the primary goal of one's life. When we put the Kingdom of God and others ahead of ourselves again and again by conscious choice, there is freedom. It is only

when we get rid of ourselves that we make room for God to inhabit the interior regions of our lives. As long as our lives are cluttered with all of the stuff of self, there is no room for the holy to find a place inside us.

III. The Call to Engagement

The third call is the call to engagement, an involvement with life and with the world. These are growing days for the American people. Everything that is happening around us is having an effect upon our attitudes and behaviors. For a long time we have been a nation of spenders and, at times, even squanderers. Now we are taking the first uncertain steps toward becoming a nation of savers. We have been a nation of consumers, and now we are taking the first steps to find the significance that comes when we eschew the reckless pursuit of consumption.

Even before all of this happened, many people in our nation had been involved in a search for significance. As always, our youth are idealistic; they are looking for a place to invest their lives. But this quest extends beyond the youth to people of middle age. People of middle age are looking back and pondering how they have invested their lives and whether or not that investment is in something important. They have one last shot at leaving some lasting mark or legacy in their lives. Simply stated, all of us are looking for ways to enlarge our lives.

There are many people in our culture who do not see Christian discipleship as a way to the enlargement of life. Many people believe that to be a Christian and to pursue faith with dedication is to withdraw from the action instead of engage in it, to spend life on the margins rather than with that which is significant. Hear the words of Jesus: "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." God's Kingdom is the best place I know, now and in the future, to invest your life.

In the fall of 1976 a young college student named Petero Sabune was a student at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. He had grown up in the African nation of Uganda, the son of an Anglican minister. At Vassar he was majoring in political science with a desire to spend his future in international relations.

One fall afternoon one of his professors asked him to host a visiting lecturer and escort him across the campus. The lecturer that day was James Forbes, minister at Riverside Church, New York City.

As the two walked along, Dr. Forbes engaged Sabune in conversation. When they came to the end of their walk and were about to part ways, Forbes looked at Sabune and asked, "Have you ever thought about going into the ministry?" The young man laughed out loud. He had spent his childhood distancing himself from his father's work. It was not cool then, and perhaps not now, to enter the ministry.

Forbes continued, "My father was a minister too," he said. "It was the one thing I never wanted to be. But I want you to think about this: being a minister is like being the queen on a chessboard. It's the only piece on the board that can move in any and every direction. If you ever change your mind or have any questions, call me." And the two parted ways.

Sabune did not give that conversation another thought until a tragedy came to his life. His older brother went back to their native Uganda. It was the era of Idi Amin, and under that regime Sabune's brother disappeared at the hands of one of the death squads. Sabune decided he wanted to give his life to fight injustice, hatred, and prejudice. He recalled the conversation with James Forbes and the analogy of being able to move in all directions. He picked up the phone and called Forbes, made a visit to see him, enrolled in Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and was ordained as an Episcopal minister.

In the years since, he has served congregations as small as 100 members and as large as a cathedral. He has done mission work in Haiti, Sudan, and Rwanda, and he is now the Protestant chaplain at Sing Sing prison. His job is to take what has been thrown away and to transform it, to make it new.⁴

If you want a larger, fuller, truer, finer life, it will be as you engage the world as a disciple of Jesus Christ. I am talking about stewardship – not the stewardship of your dollars, but the stewardship of your life. Stewardship is about taking proper care of the potential that you have been given at the hands of a gracious and gifted God.

There are calls that are placed upon your life: the call to humility, the call to renunciation, and the call to be engaged in the world for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ.

May we pray: Today, O God, we are called to be your disciples. Help us to hear the ways and the nuances of your call and help us to respond willingly. Amen.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ That people create Jesus in their own image is a problem recognized by many writers. This is succinctly expressed in Clyde Fant, *The Misunderstood Jesus* (Macon, Georgia: Peake Road, 1996), preface. There are many other excellent sources for the varied interpretations of Jesus, such as John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
- ² As quoted in Fant, preface.
- ³ Eugene Peterson describes this as the difference between the ascetic movement (no) in salvation and the aesthetic movement (yes) in salvation. For a fuller discussion, see Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), pp. 194-199.
- ⁴ This story is recounted in *O-The Oprah Magazine*, February, 2009.