

**The challenge of following Jesus**  
**Mark 8:31-38**

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**February 25, 2018**

Imagine travelling along with Jesus on the way to Caesarea Philippi. Imagine as you walk along dusty roads following the teacher who has so engaged you. Jesus begins to teach and says the following. He says 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.

Imagine how you would feel hearing these words. Would these words strike fear into you? Or perhaps horror? Disbelief? How can this happen to your beloved teacher? You probably wouldn't even hear the part about rising again. No wonder Peter takes Jesus aside and says no way. Don't say that. This must not happen. And Jesus rebukes Peter saying he is focused on human things rather than divine things.

Perhaps this is how Jesus is giving the disciples (and us) full disclosure about what it means to follow Jesus. It will not be an easy path by any means. As he says later to the disciples and as well to the crowd, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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. Your teacher will suffer and be killed? If you want to follow me, you will lose your life to save it? Come on now? Who would follow Jesus under these circumstances? And yet they do. We do. There is something powerful about Jesus' call.

In all this I hear how challenging following Jesus will be. I hear how much it will take and at the same time how at the end, we will save our lives. What does all this mean? One thing it does not mean is that Jesus is not inviting us to hate ourselves and seek out suffering. Jesus is inviting us to follow him knowing that there will be challenges and sacrifices to come.

I think many of us when we start following Jesus, forget about the challenges that follow. We feel the joy and excitement of being called to a ministry or task and then are terribly disappointed when things seem to go wrong.

I remember when I felt called to be a priest. It was such a high to have said yes to this call and I remember a friend sitting me down and saying, you know it is going to be hard. You will have to work with a parish committee and diocesan committees. They will pry into every part of your life and you will have no control over much of it. It will take years even before you get to seminary. I didn't know much of this and while it was daunting, I was still ready to go forward. And then came the times when it truly got hard, when I was so aware of the human errors in the ordination process and frustrated by placing my call in the hands of others. I was ready to quit, to walk away because it was all just too much. In my prayer life, I was given the strength to go. And I did prepare myself for the no and explored other ways to follow Christ and yet the various committees and the Bishop said yes to me. I was ordained and have been fulfilled in so

many wonderful ways as I serve the church as a priest. This doesn't mean the challenges have not continued. They seem to be a part of following Christ. I think what I am hearing from Jesus in this gospel, is that when you say yes to following him, there will be challenges – challenges that will turn your life upside down, challenges that will test every fiber of your being, and challenges in which you seem to lose your life. In fact, one should expect these challenges.

If I think about it, I see it so often in the church. Someone will feel a call to serve in the food pantry and the first few weeks he or she will feel so good and then challenges arise with a difficult guest or another volunteer who wants to do things differently or who doesn't seem to appreciate your work. The smooth sailing and your enjoyment seems to be gone and yet if you persist, you may find that this is where God is calling you to, the joy will come again. Maybe, losing your life means not choosing the easy way out, but hanging in to see the fruit of your work. This is part of following God's call.

Last week, I spoke about feeling called to do something about the gun violence that is an epidemic in our country. I know there will be challenges in this call. I worry about being perceived as too political and not making a place for both sides. I worry about not making a place for our congregation to vent their frustrations, grief and feelings of losing hope. This past week, I have had a few conversations with parishioners – however all from the gun control side. I have donated to the Sandy Hook Promise Fund. I have looked up resources for congregations and have one parishioner researching walks to participate in. Most importantly of all I feel called to listen, to hear the stories – all the stories from both sides even if it is uncomfortable.

I believe taking up our cross and following Jesus, means expecting the challenges. It means going into those uncomfortable places and listening. I believe it means following our call even if our family, friends and parishioners disagree with our actions. I believe it also means giving them voice and space to do what they feel called to do.

So my friends, what is God calling you to do this Lenten season? What challenges have arisen? How are you being tempted to give up and how can you come back to your call?

So imagine yourselves walking alongside Jesus. Think about how he is asking you to follow him. Pray for the strength to do that amidst any challenges knowing that they will come. Jesus needs us to follow in the midst of whatever arises. How will you take up your cross?