

September 12, 2021

Texts: Isaiah 50: 4-9a, Mark 8: 27-35

Title: "Characteristics of Christ We Need"

There's a story about a woman who was sitting at her second story window as she opened a birthday card from a friend. In it she found a twenty-dollar bill. As she read the card, her eyes were distracted by the movement of a shabbily dressed stranger down below, leaning against a post in front of the building. She couldn't get him off her mind.

She thought, "he might have greater need for this than I do." So she slipped the bill into an envelope on which she wrote the words, "Don't despair," and she threw it out the window. The stranger below picked it up, read it, looked up, smiled, and waved as he walked away.

The next day she was about to leave the house when a knock came at her door. She found the same shabbily dressed man smiling as he handed her a roll of bills. "What are these for?" she asked. He replied: "That's the sixty bucks you won, lady. 'Don't Despair' paid five to one."

Wouldn't it be something if life always worked like that? That every time we did something good for somebody we'd get an instant reward. People would be doing good deeds nonstop. The problems of this world would be solved overnight. But that's not the way life works, is it? In fact, the shabbily dressed stranger could just as easily have harassed her for more money which you might have expected me to say.

So why do good for others if there's no guarantee that any good will come of it?

Why not hold on to what we have like Scrooge? Where's the motivation to be a generous, caring person if life doesn't reward you back in kind? There's only one motivation I know of, (*pause*) it's because you are a follower of Jesus Christ.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. Jesus is telling his disciples that he is going to suffer and die and then rise again. I don't think they heard the part about the rising again; they were so shocked by his statement that this ministry were in with him would was going to lead to his death. They were expecting it to lead to a victory! And what was to become of them? You can be sure they were concerned about that. Jesus, on the other hand, knew full well that his mission was going to be hard fought, requiring sacrifice and the willingness to give up one's life for the cause and for the disciples, perhaps there would be no earthly reward!

And then he says this to those around him, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

Most of us aren't into "losing our life." In fact, many of our thoughts are about enhancing our lives--finding a better way to invest our money, or looking for a great new restaurant to try, or a better school for our kids, or a new pair of running shoes. No, losing our lives isn't something we would think about unless it's for one reason: *we follow Jesus*. If we are serious about following him, he'll lead us to places we would never expect. So friends, are we "all in" for Jesus?

Briefly, we going to cover three characteristics of those who are committed to follow Him.

**Number one is compassion. More than anything else Jesus was motivated by compassion for human beings.** That's a big part of why he came to us--to demonstrate God's love for all especially for those he called "the least and the lost." He had an attitude of compassion toward most everyone he encountered. Remember how he wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19: 41-44, Matthew 23: 37-39).

Remember where it says, "When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." For us to continue his ministry which is our calling by the way, we also must see the world around us through eyes of compassion. If we hate the world. If we are angry at the world. It's hard to love the world. And yes it's difficult. It's difficult to have compassion especially when people aren't always compassionate back to you?

**Characteristic number two is courage. Christ had a lot of courage to literally take up his cross and give his life for us.** I don't know how much we really think about courage as needed to follow Jesus. I think we've all heard stories of people going about their daily lives when they suddenly face a disaster or a serious accident or some instance when people are in trouble and need help. Yesterday was September 11<sup>th</sup>. So many incredible acts of courage took place on that day didn't they. But courage may needed in perhaps smaller ways on a daily basis.

How about having the courage to share an uplifting word with a stranger on the street; someone who looks like they could use some words of encouragement.

And for some, it might take some courage to speak to someone here at church whom you don't know or to whom you haven't had a word with for a long time.

It takes compassion to be a follower of Jesus, but it also often takes courage to put that compassion into practice. There's barriers. Things get in the way. A lack of courage might just be the thing that's keeping us from going deeper into living our faith. Courage.

**And one more thing that characterizes someone who's willing to "take up their cross" and follow Christ and that's the willingness to say "yes" when an opportunity comes. I'm talking about the Lord's everyday call to us to give of our time, our talent, our money in order further His mission to bring the Kingdom of God to all people. There may just be something you are uniquely gifted to do but you haven't said "yes." Following Christ means personal "sacrifice."** That didn't make sense to his disciples. They were surprised that Christ's call included suffering and sacrifice; maybe even death (pause). But death wasn't the end of the story, was it. His death gave birth to a movement the likes of which the world had never seen.

You and I, if we're committed or perhaps "recommitted" to this journey of following Christ, may have suffering and sacrifice ahead of us but you know what; those opportunities to serve with compassion and courage just might change your life.

What's in it for me we might ask? What's in it for me to follow Jesus. Life my friends. Abundant life. Power for living like we've not had before. And one day the Voice will say "Well done, good and faithful servant." Amen.