

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Following Jesus”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 24—September 16, 2018

Lessons: James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Have you ever had a time when you were embarrassed or saddened or disturbed by hateful words spoken by people who claim to be Christian leaders? I think of the time that one church leader suggested that God does not hear the prayers of a Jew? Really? Does that mean that God did not hear the prayers of Jesus? I think of church people who have been known to picket funerals, including Senator McCain’s, with signs saying “Most people go to hell” and others that are worse. Really? Can you imagine Jesus going to a funeral and proclaiming that kind of message? You could come up with your own list of offensive speech and action by supposedly Christian people. Presbyterian Chris Henry was complaining how unfair it is that such intolerant and offensive perspectives were being allowed to speak for him and all other Christians. A friend of Mr. Henry offered a profound and simple response: “Chris, they only speak for you if you don’t speak for yourself.”¹

Jesus was going along with his disciples and he asked them, “who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Today we have the opportunity to proclaim the Jesus we have come to know in the reading of Scripture and in the practice of prayer, in our service to others, and in the example shown us by justice loving people across the ages. Who do you say that I am?

In my time here at Green Hill, people might use traditional language to answer that question. Some might rely on the Nicene Creed and say that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God or they might say simply that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Yet more important than that, I suspect that people here might suggest that Jesus is the most powerful example of love in the world. That’s what we say. And we demonstrate that name over and again. Here, I have discovered people who come forward for communion and before ever taking the bread look me in the eye and say: “Tom, Jesus loves you.” I’ve learned from others who told me that they disagreed with something I had said and then smiled and said: “And I love you.” I’ve learned from teachers who share their faith with our children in joyous and caring ways. I’ve learned from members who spend time cooking and delivering meals and gifts to those who are in need. I suspect I am not the only one who has felt the warmth of a Green Hill welcome and I don’t know anyone who likes stains on the carpet downstairs, but I learned last week that maybe they are badges of honor and a sign that lives actually are being saved when AA and Al-Anon meet downstairs throughout the week. Part of following Jesus is speaking for ourselves, proclaiming in our own lives and in our own words who Jesus really is. Who do you say that I am?

Of course, when we answer that question, we won’t always get it exactly right, so be humble. Peter answered by saying that Jesus was the Messiah and most of us would agree with him. A-plus Peter. Then Jesus starts talking about suffering, betrayal and death and Peter wants nothing to do with that. He got the right title, but he had the wrong understanding of the meaning of that title for Jesus. Peter is expecting a Messiah who will establish God’s rule with

¹ Christopher A. Henry, *Saying and Doing*, © The Christian Century, September 10, 2012

power and authority and bring glory and reward to his followers.² That is the understanding that Jesus rebukes. *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.* The context of these hard words is Jesus' teaching that he must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes—all the good religious leaders—and be killed, and after three days rise again. That is a whole new understanding of what Messiah means; it is no wonder that Peter doesn't understand.

These are difficult words. Are we really called to suffering and rejection and death? Is that what discipleship is all about? Our problem here is that like Peter, we miss the most important words of all. Jesus taught them that he would undergo great suffering and rejection and be killed and after three days rise again. Suffering, rejection and death are not the whole story. New life is.

Recently I was reading about Dietrich Bonhoeffer the great German theologian and pastor. Bonhoeffer recognized the evil of the Nazis and chose to fight that evil. He stayed in Germany when he could have found refuge elsewhere so that he could be with his people, to care for them. Eventually he was arrested and yet even in prison, his attention was focused on caring for those around him. Even his guards came to respect him, some smuggling his papers and poems out of prison. He died in a concentration camp just days before it was liberated by the Allies. He knew suffering and rejection and yet listen to how one German scholar described him: "The guiding force in Bonhoeffer's life, underlying all that he did, worked and suffered for, was his faith and love of God, in whom he found peace and happiness."³ Suffering and rejection? Yes. But life in its fullness too.

I think of a great many people who have known oppression, suffering, hard times that anyone would want to avoid, and yet in the midst of that suffering, they were also incredibly alive. Some years ago, when the apartheid government was still in power, Desmond Tutu was asked to address the World Council of Churches. He was delayed because his government would not let him leave. When he finally arrived, he was greeted by a standing ovation and he proclaimed Paul's words: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Suffering, yes, but life so much more!

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that "the deep secret of Jesus' hard words to us in this passage is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of life, because fear of death always turns into fear of life, into a stingy, cautious way of living that is not really living at all. The deep secret of Jesus' hard words is that the way to have abundant life is not to save it but to spend it, to give it away, because life cannot be shut up and saved any more than a bird can be put in a shoebox and stored on a closet shelf.

"Or better yet: life cannot be shut up and saved any more than fresh spring water can be put in a mason jar and kept in a kitchen cupboard. Oh, it will remain water, and if you ever open it up you can probably still drink it, but it will have lost its essence, its life, which is to be poured out, to be moving, living water, rushing downstream to share its wealth without ever looking back.

"Peter wanted to prevent Jesus from doing that. He did not want Jesus' life to be spilled, to be wasted. He wanted to save it, to preserve it, to find a safer, more comfortable way for Jesus to be Lord. What he forgot, apparently, was that Jesus' supply of life was never-

² See Harry B. Adams, *Pastoral Perspective*, Proper 19, Mark 8:27-38, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B. Vol. 4. © 2009

³ Gerhard Leibholz, *Memoit*, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Macmillan Publishing Co. © 1979.

ending, that what poured out of him poured out of an underground source so fine, so strong, that the more of himself he gave, the more he had, a veritable geyser of living water sent to drench a dry, dry world.” These words of Jesus are not actually an invitation to “follow Jesus into death, but an invitation to follow him into life, both now and later on, but we can only follow him if we do not get tripped up on suffering and death, if we do not get so frightened and preoccupied by those that we forget who we are and whose we are and why we are alive in the first place.”⁴

When Bessie and I first got engaged, I met a wonderful man, an old friend of Bessie’s family, named Ross Sherbrooke. Ross taught me a very simple poem:

A bell’s not a bell ’till you ring it;
A song’s not a song ’till you sing it;
Love was not put in your heart there to stay;
Love is not love ’till you give it away.

If we want to follow Jesus, then follow his example of a life lived for others. Love and life are not really love and life until you give them away. Find real life by giving yours away with generosity and compassion.

Let us pray: Bless us dear God with words and actions that proclaim who you really are, that the world might discover life that is real life, following the way of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Risking Life*, in *The Seeds of Heaven*. Forward Movement Publications. © 1990