

## What Does it Cost?

Mark 9:2-9

I get a kick out of bumper stickers. And I like to glance at the person driving the car adorned with bumper stickers. Here are a few bumper stickers that I have seen or heard about over the years that always make me laugh:

What If The Hokey Pokey Is What It's All About?

Driver Carries No Cash — He's Married!

I'm Retired — Go Around Me!

Normal People Scare Me!

Save Our Planet — It's The Only One With Chocolate!

I Get Along With God Just Fine; It's His Fan Club I Can't Stand!

Do You Follow Jesus This Close?

That last one is a good one (and yes, Karen, it should be “closely” not “close”.) It's funny, but like all good humor there's an element of truth to it. From time to time we need to look at how closely we're following Jesus.

We talk a big game about Jesus. We ask, “What would Jesus do?” We say we want to be like Christ. **We claim to be followers of Christ** - but how closely are we following him and what does it mean to follow him?

Mark's account of the Transfiguration is a good example of how misguided we can sometimes be about following Jesus. We see that in our lesson this morning.

It's kind of funny when you think about it. Peter must have thought it was cool to be up there with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, to stay there forever and not deal with the realities of life. What he didn't realize was that this special moment was not to provide him a way to escape the world but was a way for God to confirm once again that Jesus was his Son, that he would die on a cross, and rise from the dead.

As they went down the mountain Jesus tried to set them straight, but they still didn't understand. They didn't understand that they were following a man who would die for the world and then live in the world through his people.

They didn't understand that following Jesus is the greatest thing in the world but it is also the hardest thing in the world to do. That it requires more than going to worship once a week or money in the plate once in a while or dusting off your Bible now and again or putting a religious bumper sticker on your car.

Most people don't realize that **when Christ calls, he calls us to come and die**. Most people don't understand that to experience an abundant life in Christ, we have to take up our cross and die. Jesus was clear about this from the start.

Huge crowds followed him wherever he went. There was this certain energy about him. He had charisma and a way with words and performed miracles and challenged people in authority. He loved everyone - the left out, thrown out, and down and out. Who wouldn't love a guy like that?

But Jesus was clear about what following him meant. “Do you really want to follow me?” he'd ask. “Then be willing to give up everything dearest to you and take up a cross. Unless you do that, you can't be my disciple.”

The Bible does not mention it, but I imagine that after Jesus spoke these words most of the crowd backed away from Jesus, disappointed and dejected. And I suspect that most of us, like those in that crowd, do the same, too.

Most often we follow Jesus from a distance. We want the perks and benefits. We want to be on the hopeful side of things. We want to have good morals and values and have someone we can pray to when we need help or a miracle. We want our eternal salvation to be secure. And there's nothing wrong with any of that, but we're not always ready to follow Jesus closely when we consider what it will cost us.

I kind of think it's like every marriage celebration I officiate. The glowing bride and excited groom stand before me at the front of the church. The bride is thinking, "This is the man of my dreams. He's going to bring me flowers every day and know what I'm thinking and exactly what to say. He's going to hang on my every word and always be patient and always just want to cuddle. He's going to rub my feet whenever I ask and surprise me with breakfast in bed."

The groom's thinking, "This is the woman of my dreams. She's always going to look this young and beautiful and meet all my needs. She'll greet me when I get home with a wink and a smile and serve my favorite meal as I relax in my lazy boy watching ESPN. She'll always tell me how strong and brilliant and gifted I am and will never nag me."

And then there's me, standing before the bride and groom who are in la-la-land paying no attention when I say, "In marriage, husband and wife are called to a new way of life, created, ordered, and blessed by God. This way of life must not be entered into carelessly or from selfish motives, but responsibly, and prayerfully."

Sooner or later one of them disappoints the other by not living up to expectations and the real marriage begins. One of them gets sick or becomes difficult to live with, and that's where real love and commitment begin. That's where acceptance, forgiveness, and mutual forbearance are born.

Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

You see, **real life begins when we die to ourselves**, our selfish desires and our trivial plans. Real life in Christ begins when we surrender our ego, our pride, and our stubbornness. God can only get started on us when we come to the place where we're free from the bondage of trite preoccupations and recognize that our only need is God. This is what it means to die.

There are many people who never accept this. Which is why there are many people - Christians all their lives - who are never spiritually fulfilled, who never grow in their faith. They've made a decision to be a disciple, but they never carry their cross. And until we carry a cross and die ourselves, we'll never really live.

If we want God to use us, we must make ourselves available, empty our lives of the things that have become more important than God, and allow God to cleanse us and renew us. We must come to a place where we can pray, "God, I'm tired of doing things on my own. I'm tired of thinking I know what's best. I'm tired of doing the same things expecting different results.

Take over my life. I give it over to you. I let go of the things I've made more important than you and ask you to fill me up. Transform me. Use me!" And when that's our honest prayer, God will move like a tidal wave in your life!

I remember a hospital visit I made in Boston while I was a seminarian working part time in the Newton Presbyterian church. I was visiting parishioners with Monty, the Head of Staff pastor, who had a way of getting to the truth of things without being abrasive – something I'm still working on.

We were visiting someone, a prominent man in the community and church, who was recovering from a drug overdose. He said, "I've lost everything — my job, my reputation, my livelihood... I've lost it all. This is the end for me."

Monty responded, "Interesting, because I see this as just the beginning." The parishioner was puzzled, "What do you mean, the beginning?" Monty said, "Well, you said you have lost everything. So I guess God has you all to himself. Just think what he can do with you now."

Come and die. Your life is waiting. Amen.