

Sermon 9-13-09¹

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Mark 8:27-38

Don't Imitate. Follow!

When I was a young boy, about 6, I wanted to grow up and work for the network services division of Mellon Bank. It wasn't because I had a great love for banking, or ATM processing, or even understanding the intricacies of converting a bank after it had been purchased. That's what my dad did.

Sometimes when my dad had to go into work on a Saturday morning, he would take me with him. I found myself enthralled by the vast expanse of space that was available in a downtown office building. I would think to myself, "Look at all the space to play in; all the hiding places for hide and go seek. No wonder my dad spent so much time here, it was a large space in which to play eight hours a day, five days a week. More than that, he got his own computer, phone, desk, and toys for amusement like a nerf basketball hoop. Who wouldn't want to work for the network services division of Mellon Bank?"

The reality is, I only wanted to be like my father. Like many young boys, I would imitate my dad, picking and choosing the qualities he

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possessed as well as the mannerisms he exhibited to try and be just like him. I got over the desire to work at Mellon Bank around the age of 8, but my dad and I still laugh about it even now. As human beings, we have a penchant for imitation. Not only kids but also adults choose people through a variety of outlets to imitate as we make their way through life. One of the pitfalls within the Christian life is this desire for imitation; particularly this desire to look upon Jesus from our point of view as a model, as a person whose life is so God-filled that we should seek to imitate it in everything we do to somehow make our lives better. It's a popular notion that has been around for hundreds of years within the life of the church and still abounds today. Isn't it odd then that Jesus himself never calls his disciples to imitate him? He never calls disciples to try and be like him. No, in everything Jesus calls his disciples to do one thing: follow!

When hearing a passage that is as familiar as our reading this morning, it's often hard for us to hear it with fresh ears; to be astounded by the breath-taking beauty and grandeur that confronts us through the witness and revelation of Jesus himself. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus and his disciples were traveling around the city Caesarea Philippi; that famous and grand city known for its Greek influenced opulence, its symbol of Roman

power and oppression, the symbols of pagan worship, and all else that stands against the mission and ministry of God to the world. In the midst of this great city and all it stands for, Jesus asks two pivotal, radical, and quintessential questions to his disciples. He wasn't concerned with asking them about what people said about the acts he had performed nor was Jesus concerned with asking his disciples how people (and themselves) perceived him in terms of what he had to say. No, Jesus confronted his disciples with a provocative question: "Who do folks say that I am?"

Now, having hung around Jesus for a number of years at this point, the disciples had picked up on the opinions of those who were milling around and so offered those to Jesus. But pressing further, Jesus confronts his disciples with an even deeper, more penetrating question; one upon which the whole gospel turns as we are taken from abstract assumptions about Jesus and encountered by the reality of who he is toward us: "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus encounters his disciples (and each one of us) with a question that demands a response. Because he has already embraced them as his own out of the freedom of his love and power he now calls for their response. In that moment, Peter embraces the seriousness of the question and by his lips confesses the fundamental Christian confession

regarding who Jesus is: “You are the Christ.” It was a primitive and limited answer, to be sure, but a confession of faith nonetheless.

And then, quite unexpectedly, Jesus sternly warns his disciples to tell no one. To us, this seems like an odd course of action since it was Jesus himself who raised the question of his identity. Yet if we see ourselves within the flow of this story, our first reaction would be to tell everyone we know who the messiah, who the christ is. Jesus is very serious about keeping the revelation of who he is as the messiah within the inner circle of his disciples until the appropriate time. In part, he wants the disciples to understand what being the messiah means for the life of the world.

Now, most within ancient Judaism expected the messiah to be a triumphant king who would win back the kingdom, kick out the Romans, and instill religious purity and order throughout the state. They connected the salvation from God that the messiah would bring with national blessing and national supremacy akin to the reign of David all those years before. This is not the kind of messiah that God has provided for his people; this is not the kind of christ God has provided by penetrating into the depths of humanity in, through, and as the man Jesus to bring about the true salvation of his people. Jesus informs his disciples that they’ve had the wrong idea about

God and his messiah all along. The Son of Man is supposed to suffer, is supposed to be rejected, is supposed to be killed, and ultimately, the Son of Man is to be raised up again. On the way outside of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus reinterprets everything the disciples thought they knew about the mission and ministry of God within the world and their hyper exuberance surrounding Jesus quickly deflates as their dreams of national blessing come crashing down around them.

Picking up on their mutual shock at Jesus' words, Peter takes him aside and proceeds to reprimand him for speaking in such a way. And at this, Jesus turns to his disciples, looks each of them in the eye, and rebukes Peter on the spot proclaiming in those famous words, "get behind me Satan." In other words, Jesus tells Peter, "don't get in my way, don't stand in the way of the glory of the gospel, and don't tread on the mission and ministry of the Lord God for the salvation of the world." Peter's mind is not set on the mission and ministry of God as revealed by God; rather he is focused solely on his own interpretation of the mission and ministry of God, from his own perspective, without any reference to God's revelation. He's called to repentance by Jesus, and, as we'll learn a few verses later, Peter

is called to follow him closely. And it's at this point that we really tap into the story.

Like Peter we approach the world and our ways of thinking from a human point of view. We just can't help ourselves. We think about God and his work in the world and we wonder, what's he up to, how come he does this and doesn't do that, where is he in the midst of various occurrences. And when it comes to discipleship, we often decide what we do or how we'll go about doing it because we determine it's the proper course of action to take. Whether it's in our relationships, in our professions, how we conduct ourselves socially or privately – in our day-to-day ordinary lives we try to determine the limits of our discipleship and then ask God to fit himself into what we come up with. This gets driven even further when we find ourselves in various situations asking, "What would Jesus do," in the hopes that in the midst of our sin-laden minds we can decide how things should go. Like Peter, we forget or fail to recognize who God is toward us in, through, and as Jesus Christ so much so that we try to live like him, try to imitate him in what we say and do, and in the end we set ourselves up for bitter disappointment and rejection. The reality is, we aren't the saviors of the world, we don't heal the wounds of sin nor do we destroy the grip of death;

we aren't the messiahs and when we try to pretend we are, we end up putting ourselves out there, confessing our glory and our strengths rather than the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

After rebuking Peter for putting himself forward, Jesus proclaims, "Whoever wants to be a follower of me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." These words are a staggering blow to the ego and to all assumptions that following Jesus will bring with it a showering of blessings in terms of recognition, status, happiness, wealth, or any other states of existence that play into the principalities and powers rather than the ministry of God. Jesus leads us to the true cost of discipleship, to the heart of denying ourselves and picking up our crosses: it isn't about bearing suffering and enduring pain because that somehow transforms us into good disciples. Rather denying ourselves and picking up our crosses is repenting of our own self-importance, recognizing that Jesus is the priority in our lives; that he crucifies our egos, reminds us that we aren't the lords of the cosmos and the saviors of the world, and invites us to participate in his mission and ministry to the world, to become disciples by following him.

This goes way beyond imitation; the path of discipleship is a path of following. Everything else is secondary when we are encountered by the

Lord our God in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit; so much so that the way of discipleship is a way that is hitched to the back of Jesus in his mission and ministry. In the end, in life and in death, Jesus becomes the center of all we say and do; he is the priority as Lord and Savior for our lives as individuals and as a Church. Thus the way of denying ourselves is the way of confessing Jesus Christ, the way of taking up our crosses is confessing to the world that we belong to our living, reigning, active, and present Lord, the way of following Jesus is to trust that we are joined in union with his crucified, risen, and saving life so that in following him we might truly live into who God calls us to be as disciples of his Son our Savior and as Christ's church here in the community of Emsworth.

Because of who God is for us in Jesus, because he is our crucified and risen Savior, our lives find purpose and meaning. Our lives are contextualized and made fully alive because of his life and his gracious invitation to follow him. It isn't a burden laid upon our shoulders nor is it a guilt-laden path that we walk alone. Rather it is the way, the truth, and the life that we are graciously bid to follow, so that our lives might be filled by the glorious life of God himself, made whole within him, and that we would

be empowered through the Holy Spirit to not only follow, but to bear witness to the mission and ministry of Jesus in our midst and in the midst of our community – to bear witness to who God is toward us in and through Jesus Christ that we might lead others to this great and glorious relationship forged by Almighty God himself out of the freedom of his love and power. We follow our Lord, walking in his ways and bearing witness to him, so that when others are encountered by Jesus' gracious invitation, "who do you say I am," they might know at the core of their beings that they have met their Lord and Savior and that their lives would be forever changed and transformed from that moment forward. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.