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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Get in Line Behind Jesus”

Scripture Text: Mark 8:27-9:1

Dear people of God, after inviting the children to come forward, a pastor began his Children’s Sermon by asking, “What’s small, gray, furry, and eats nuts?” There was total silence. Again the pastor asked, “What’s small, gray, furry, and eats nuts?” Again, total silence. The pastor then tried to coax an answer from the children, saying “None of you have any idea what’s small, gray, furry, and eats nuts? Come on, take a guess.” Finally one timid youngster put up her hand and said, “Pastor, I know the answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.”

We all have our idea of who Jesus was. So did his contemporaries. When Jesus asked the question, “Who do people say that I am?” there were many answers. But then he asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Probably like the pastor with the children, there was total silence at first. And so, very likely Jesus had to ask the question again, “Who do you say that I am?” No doubt by this time, everyone could sense the tension and the awkwardness. Still, no one wanted to answer. Each disciple’s eyes turned toward the others. Finally breaking the silence, Peter blurted out, “You are the Messiah!” Good job, Peter! He stepped up to the plate and hit a home run.

But did he know what he was saying when he labelled Jesus the Messiah? It’s one thing to have the right answer. It’s quite another to know what that answer

means. Jesus no doubt realizes that what Peter means by the Messiah and what he means are two different things. And so, while Peter is still standing at the plate admiring his home run, Jesus begins to explain the correct definition of the Messiah. Jesus knows that the prevalent view of the Messiah was to be a conquering hero in the image of the great King David, leading his army to defeat the enemies of Israel. The Messiah was thought to be the second coming of Elijah, who would reinstitute the proper worship of God throughout the land, especially in the holy temple in Jerusalem. The Messiah was thought to be a reincarnation of Moses, who would go to all the Gentile lands where Jews were living and liberate them and bring them back on a journey, not lasting 40 years, but only a few months as they return to their historic homeland where they could live in peace and security. And the Messiah was to rule over the land of Israel as their greatest king, the one who would usher in the millennium, not only for the Jewish people but for all the nations of the world. These were no doubt the images that were swirling through the mind of not only Peter, but all of the disciples when the word, Messiah, was mentioned.

And so, Jesus knows that he's got to put an abrupt end to these fantasies about who he is. He needs to tell them about what the kingdom of God is really all about. He must do some plain talking right now. No parables, no riddles, no lyrical sayings. Jesus must use bullets now. He must do some straight shooting. There's no longer any time for misunderstanding. Jesus knows that the disciples must be told now what they're going to experience if they choose to follow him. There are a lot of faulty beliefs out there in Palestine about the Messiah and they must come to an end. And these mistaken beliefs must be corrected beginning with the disciples. Jesus is going

to announce his plan of action to the disciples right now. He knows that it's not going to fit the job description the disciples have for him. It's not even going to be close. There's going to be no talk about a national liberation. There's going to be no mention of political reform. There's going to be no outline for how hundreds of thousands of Jews, perhaps millions, will be brought back to Jerusalem and how they will be lured to the temple with boisterous worship services that will blow the roof right off the building. No, there's nothing of that in the speech that Jesus gives to his disciples. They need to know that they are not going to be cabinet members of a mighty administration that's going to put Israel on the world map once and for all. Power, position, prestige? The disciples are going to receive none of those by following Jesus. No, instead, what is in store for them is to watch their teacher, their Messiah, endure suffering, rejection, and death.

Well, when the disciples hear this, I'm sure they are saying to themselves, "This can never be! This can never happen to the Messiah!" Peter, in fact, doesn't even try to hide his feelings, but takes Jesus aside, perhaps not to embarrass him in front of the others, and seeks to set him straight. "Jesus, buddy," Peter says, while putting his arm around him, "You have it all wrong. Surely you know that the hope of Israel for centuries has been that the Messiah would be the great savior of our people. Now, Jesus, I know that you might have some misgivings about following through on God's Messianic plans for you. I know that not everyone has come on board with your mission. We have received some opposition, yes, especially from the religious leadership. But you can't allow that to stop you now Jesus. You'll be able to take care of them, don't worry. After all, you're the Messiah! Now no more talk about

suffering or rejection or death. You're upsetting us and you'll scare the people away. They don't want to hear that. They only want to hear good things. They only want to hear about God defeating their enemies and allowing them to live in peace and prosperity."

Peter had taken Jesus aside in private. But Jesus is going to answer him in front of all the disciples. Jesus has nothing to hide. He rebukes Peter boldly in public, saying, "Get behind me Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." (Mark 8:33). Wow! That seemed uncalled for. But perhaps this was not as severe a reprimand as it sounds. Maybe Jesus was simply stating to not only Peter, but to all the disciples, "Get in line behind me!"

We must remember that the figure of Satan in that day didn't have all the baggage that we attach to that name today. In previous episodes in Mark's Gospel, the disciples had witnessed Jesus healing various persons who were possessed by demons, or we could say Satan, such as the Syrophenician woman's daughter, which I preached on last Sunday. Perhaps Jesus is saying to Peter and the other disciples that it's not the role of his followers to possess Jesus. It's their duty to follow him. When Jesus rebukes Peter, he doesn't say to him, "Get lost!" He says, "Get behind me, that is, get in line in back of me. Be a follower of me. Don't try to guide me in a direction that I don't want to go. Don't allow your presuppositions about what the Messiah should do to steer you on the wrong way."

This way of interpreting Jesus puts a slightly different slant on things, doesn't it? Jesus is reminding not only the disciples, but the whole crowd, as the text says, that if they want to follow Jesus, they can't just hang around him while he performs

healings and miracles. Following Jesus involves suffering, not pleasure; it necessitates rejection, not popularity. It means following a path that leads to the cross, not to fame and fortune. But it also means, for those who remain faithful, resurrection. Whoever wants to preserve their life will wind up losing it. Only those who are willing to risk their lives for the sake of the Messiah and his kingdom will wind up saving them.

Imagine how the disciples and the crowd feel after hearing these words of Jesus. He probably lost half his followers that day alone, who walked away, no doubt, shaking their heads.

We should ask ourselves today at the beginning of this new church year, “Why do we follow Jesus?” Do we do it for recognition? Are we afraid of going to hell? Is it to help us to feel less guilty about the things we’ve done in our lives or continue to do? Is it so that God will bless us and our families and make us rich and healthy and happy?” What are our motives in following Jesus?”

When we celebrate Holy Communion, we sometimes read from the UCC Statement of Faith, which talks about accepting “the cost and joy of discipleship.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a very promising professor of theology at the University of Berlin in the early 1930s. After the Nazis came to power in 1933, he could have returned to New York City where he earlier did postgraduate work at Union Theological Seminary and fought Nazi tyranny from the safety of the United States. But he decided to stay in Germany where he became a courageous leader of the church’s resistance. His book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, shows how his leadership was rooted in the conviction that to endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is rather the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus.

Not all of us are going to be like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He died a martyr for the Christian faith at the hands of the Nazis. But all of us need to be reminded that to follow Jesus is not going to be a joyride. What is the Satan in your own life that is tempting you not to follow Jesus? Is it materialism? Maybe you need to let go of things and to give that money to the church. Is it shyness or not wanting to bother people? Maybe you need to be bold and to invite your children and friends to church. No, better yet, bring them to this church. Tell them on Saturday that you're going to pick them up and bring them to church on Sunday. Does that sound crazy? Not anywhere nearly as crazy as Jesus sounded to the disciples.

Where do you need to get in line behind Jesus? Where do you need to be led by God in your life? Where do you need to take up your cross and follow Jesus? We are at the start of a new church year. It's promises to be a very exciting year. Our Sunday School is growing. Our Confirmation Class is the largest it has ever been since I've been the pastor here. Things are looking up for Park Congregational Church. As we look at our church, we must try to answer how we can get in line behind Jesus. Are we going to give the answer that we think others will want to hear, like the little girl's answer to the pastor, or are we going to give the answer that will help us grow spiritually and help the church to grow spiritually?

Perhaps the answer will not be easy for us. Just as it wasn't easy for the disciples who had to relearn what it meant to be a follower of the Messiah. And the work will be even harder than the answer. But we have the assurance that if we remain faithful, we will be able to see the kingdom of God come with power. Amen.