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February 25, 2018 – “Get Behind Me” (Mark 8:27-38) |
| Rev. Jennie Sankey |

Today, 6 of our 8th graders have joined/are joining the church, after engaging in their confirmation class this year. One of the questions all new members are asked on the day they join is “Who is your Lord and Savior?” The correct answer is given to them ahead of time: “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.” It’s not much different from the question Jesus asked Peter. “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “you are the Messiah.” When Jesus begins to teach about what that really means (undergoing great suffering, being rejected by the leaders of his own religion, getting killed and then rising again) Peter starts to get a little worked up. He pulls Jesus aside and starts to tell him how things really are.

I’ve been imagining what it would be like to have Peter in confirmation class. The three years the 12 disciples got to spend with Jesus was basically the first confirmation class. Our kids are lucky we’ve got it down to 7 months! But their class was pretty good. They got hands-on experience and learned from the master how to be disciples. I also imagine it was pretty rowdy. From what we read in Mark, it seems the disciples were rarely paying attention when Jesus talked, and annoyingly, probably talking over him frequently. It’s not that they didn’t know the correct answers, but they didn’t always have a good grasp on what those answers meant. In our confirmation class at Pleasant Hill, we spend time trying to figure out what’s behind those “answers.” In writing their statements of faith and further reflecting on what we mean when we say Jesus is our Lord and Savior, 8th grade responses included:

“Jesus is my role model.”

“I am glad that he is my savior, because he loves me even when I do something wrong.”

“Knowing Jesus is my Lord and Savior means being a disciple, which means showing you love God like Erik Mjorud and teaching like Jennie Sankey.”

“I am blown away that one person has this much love for us.”

Although Mark doesn’t tell us exactly what Peter said to Jesus, I think we can make a pretty educated guess that it was something like “Jesus, no…I’m with you, but that’s just not right. The Messiah is going to reestablish Israel’s position greatest of all nations! The Messiah is going lead us to rise up and end Roman oppression. The Messiah is going to bring an era of peace, with us on top of course! How are you going to do that if you’re busy being persecuted and killed? Let’s tell people what you’re really going to do.”

Peter was right in his answer of the “Messiah,” but off in his understanding. Jesus wasn’t here to rise up in military action, he was here to lead by example and take up the cross.

At the center of almost every Christian worship space you’ll find a cross. Sometimes they’re big, sometimes they’re small. Sometimes Jesus is hanging on them, sometimes they’re bare. Sometimes they’re ornately decorated or made from a special kind of wood or metal. We see them outside the worship space too. Perhaps you wear one around your neck or have one hanging from your rearview mirror or have a tattoo of one on your arm. As a pastor, I sometimes receive crosses as gifts. I have one made from a beautiful broken teacup that belonged to my great Aunt Beth, and one made of olivewood from Bethlehem. As Christians, we see a cross and recognize it as a symbol of our faith. But I think sometimes our crosses are so pretty, we forget the other things that come with the cross. In Jesus’ time, the cross was where the Roman government executed people who opposed them, to make a statement of “this ends here.” They were symbols of suffering, death, humiliation and defeat. So, it’s no wonder that Peter would have been so concerned by Jesus’ talk of suffering and continued prediction of his own death.

Taking up the cross in the way that Jesus intends us to isn’t a natural thing for us. I suspect that because it’s a symbol we see often, that we become desensitized to its real meaning. Because we know of Jesus’ resurrection, the cross becomes a symbol of hope and new life out of death, but because it’s just everywhere around us, I think that message can get lost. Instead we may carry it around like a talisman, making us feel safe. Maybe you’ve even heard the meaning of the cross used abusively, when someone tells you in a painful situation, “well, that just must be your cross to bear right now.” Taking up the cross isn’t safe. It also isn’t abusive or a burden to bear. Taking up the cross isn’t accepting violence or acting out of selfishness or making fear-based decisions. Taking up the cross isn’t a power move to be the best or first. Taking up the cross means denying your fear, selfishness, violence and hunger for power to instead choose radical love. Jesus tells Peter to “get behind him,” and I take that seriously. To live the way offered to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we’ve got to get behind Jesus, and follow where he leads.

The current conversation in our country, on our Facebook pages, in our church school classes, and in the media on what to do about school shootings is steeped in violence. I’ve got to tell you that after living through the decades of school shootings that began with Columbine, I’ve become desensitized to it. When I heard the news of the 17 students killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, at first it barely registered. I think my verbal response to the news was, “oh.” Oh, it’s happened again. Oh, this is sad. Oh, I hate that this is the way things are. I have become desensitized to the violence of children dying. And that’s awful. This time around, I braced myself not for the grief and processing, but for the media coverage, the arguments on social media, the way we would use this tragedy to push whatever agenda we could. But this week, I snapped out of it. The nation watched at first blankly and maybe now at attention as the voices of young people rose out of grief to say, #neveragain. We saw a fresh example this week, of what it looks like to take up your cross and follow Jesus as students from Douglas High School got online, and got to Washington, and got our attention crying out for answers and action, so that #neveragain will a school shooting happen. These teenagers are denying what is “normal” for a high school student and standing up in a big way for love of one another and a country of peers they have never met. They are taking up their crosses and following in the footsteps of Jesus. May our discipleship be half as bold.

Jesus explains to the crowd that has now gathered to join his 12-man confirmation class what being a disciple means. To be fair to Peter, we’ve got the benefit of hindsight on what happens with the rest of Jesus’ life when we get asked the questions, “who do you say that I am?” But as we see in Jesus’ response to Peter, the disciples, and the crowd that surrounds him, naming Jesus as Messiah isn’t the full answer. That’s why when new members join our church the questions that always follows “who is your Lord and savior?” is this: “Do you intend to be a faithful disciple, to obey his word and show his love?” The answer, in case you were wondering, is “I will.” And while the answer is short, the heft of this promise is no small thing, if we take the words of Jesus’ in the gospel of Mark seriously. Jesus said to all who were listening “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Taking up our own crosses doesn’t mean we all need to go get personally nailed to one, but the example that Jesus shows us is clear. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus showed us how radically far he would take his love for us. Maybe to get behind Jesus and take up our cross, we’ve got to figure out how our lives can best show how far we will take our love for others and for God. When asked to reflect on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, here are some of the confirmands (the 8th graders at PHPC, not the 12 first century ones) reflections on what being a disciple looks like:

“It’s hard to love everyone. While I do intend to be his disciple I know that this will be a challenge. It’s easy to get caught up in something or someone you don’t like. I need to remember to love everyone I meet and greet them with welcoming arms in the name of God.”

“I intend to follow God as my father, and I will love my neighbors in the image of God. I will always and forever put love first over exclusion.”

Being a disciple means… “helping anyone in the church community, and anyone who isn’t. I will help anyone in need, make people feel more at home, and care for anyone going through rough times.”

 “My faith journey doesn’t end here.”

 “Jesus said, “My commandment is this, love one another just as I love you.” That is what I intend to always do.”

They know that this choice wasn’t about joining a social club or making themselves look good. You can hear in their answers that there is an understanding that following Jesus will influence their behavior especially in their interactions with other people. This was a choice of discipleship, to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

How that will manifest itself in each of their lives will depend on how God leads them to best show their love. And at this church, that’s what we’ll keep trying to look for. How can we follow their example, reminded of what taking up the cross might look like, and get behind Jesus?

Last Sunday, the Middle School Youth group had a night of “RAKtivism,” Random Acts of Kindness Activism. They had a $100 budget, 15 minutes to plan, and an hour to spread the love of Christ with acts of kindness around Duluth. On the bus, a few blew up balloons and wrote encouraging notes on them. The first stop was Target, where we spread out. Some went on a quest to find flowers, stuffed animals, candy, and doughnuts. Others made a side trip to a cashier, where they exchanged a $10 bill for quarters. Kindness spread through Target that night. Balloons were passed out, flowers lovingly offered, and quarters stashed near vending machines. A stop at the Starbucks left behind a gift card for those buying coffee next to use. We made a quick stop at the hospital on our way back, where we offered flowers and candy to the ER staff and stuffed animals for the triage rooms for waiting children. Doughnuts and Oreos were delivered to the fire station, all accompanied by “thank you for what you do.”

Does taking up the cross involve candy and flowers? Not always. But we learned some important lessons about showing God’s love that night.

* It takes some serious time! We contemplated what we could have done if only we had more minutes in youth group.
* It’s uncomfortable. People are so steeped in “stranger danger,” that often the first reaction would be one of fear and avoidance. It felt risky too, for us to approach strangers with gifts.
* Some moments are more meaningful than others. While plenty of people gave us smiles in response, upon receiving a pink balloon, one woman exclaimed. “I’ll keep it! Today is my 7th anniversary of surviving cancer!”
* Sometimes there are rewards, like the samples of salted caramel mocha frappucinos we received from the Starbucks employees, but mostly there are just confused looks.

Taking up the cross won’t always look like roses and doughnuts, and will take a lot more time than an hour on a Sunday night. And while we enjoyed our “random” acts of kindness, there is nothing random about what God brought about in Jesus Christ. Getting behind Jesus and taking up the cross will often have greater risk than offering someone a flower. Sometimes it will look like what students from Parkland, Florida are doing to enact change for other teenagers their age. Sometimes it will look using your body to block violence being done to children, like Assistant football coach Aaron Feis, who died saving the lives of many during the shooting. All the time, getting behind Jesus and taking up the cross will catch someone’s attention, when they notice how radically far we are willing to go to share God’s love. Peter had to learn that over and over again through his confirmation class, a class I don’t think he graduated from until Jesus had died and risen again, and Peter could finally exclaim in truth and understanding when he saw him alive, “It is the Lord!” We are much the same, needing reminders to take up our cross and follow Jesus. Most of us will not face giving our own lives for the sake of another, but we have daily opportunities to consider what “taking up the cross” kind of love will look like for us, how we choose between our way and God’s way, between denying ourselves and denying our neighbor, between ways of violence and ways of resistance, between ways of death and ways of life. Who is your Lord and Savior, Pleasant Hill? “Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior.” Then let’s get behind him and follow.