

Mark 8:27-38
May 14, 2023
Ellen Crawford True

God's Own Heart

This month we are offering a sermon series entitled, "Misquoted: Things Jesus Didn't Say." This week's thing Jesus didn't say is, "Follow your heart." While it's probably pretty obvious that Jesus didn't say it, following your heart has reached a level of wisdom and advice making it a kind of gospel in its own way. At the risk of being a Grinch in the thick of graduation season and on Mather's Day, no matter how pretty and Pinterest-worthy we paint it, "Follow your heart" is not what Jesus says.

The text for this morning comes from the gospel of Mark. At this point in Mark's story, John the Baptist has been killed for confronting Herod for his Law-flaunting ways. Jesus has fed thousands on a hillside, told a few parables, and healed a demon-possessed man as well as a blind man. And now he pauses along the way to ask the disciples a question. [Read Mark 8:27-38, Common English Bible]

The gospel of Mark moves at a blistering pace toward the book's climax: the crucifixion. Throughout the narrative, Jesus repeatedly tells the disciples and others not to tell anyone what they have witnessed with him. It sounds like a lousy marketing strategy. This man from Galilee preaches unlike anyone they have encountered. He heals the sick, heals a woman who has been bleeding for decades, brings a little girl back to life, and feeds thousands using only two fish and five loaves of bread. And the disciples are not supposed to tell anyone. It seems that word has gotten out however, because Jesus asks what the disciples are hearing. What's the word on the street? Who do people say that I am?

John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets are the answers that top the informal survey. John, Elijah, and the prophets are all fiery preachers who proclaim God's reign of justice and mercy amid an unjust and merciless world. Jesus does the same, of course. And yet the disciples seem to

grasp that there is something more to the story, more to who Jesus is than simply a prophet. And Peter—who at the risk of dating myself terribly reminds me of Arnold Horshack from *Welcome Back, Kotter*—speaks up and says, “You are the Christ.” Jesus responds not with a gold star, but with another stern reminder not to tell anyone. And he does not stop there. *The Message* translation reads:

‘It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive.’ He said this simply and clearly so they couldn’t miss it.¹

Peter quickly goes from prize pupil to lead protester. This is not at all what he has in mind. He grabs Jesus and tries to correct him. Other translations say that he rebukes Jesus, the same word used to describe what Jesus does to demons.

I understand Peter’s reaction. *Things are going just fine, Jesus, really well in fact. Why on earth would you say something so horrible when everything is amazing? When you called me away from my fishing boat, I did not think I was signing up to follow you on a death march.* In response, Jesus turns around and rebukes Peter. Then he gathers the disciples and the crowd around him as he spells out all that following him actually entails including self-sacrifice and picking up a cross.

There is a difference between bearing a cross and taking up the cross. It is good and faithful and sacred to cope with the burdens that come our way, whether they be illness, death, neglect, disappointment. We often describe such situations as crosses to bear, and by the grace of God, we do not have to bear them alone. Nothing in this verse changes the fact that bearing hard things is holy work, but this passage is talking about something different. This passage tells us to *take up* our cross and follow, not exactly the strategy for earthly glory or success by the larger world’s standards. As one

¹ Mark 8:30-32, *The Message*

scholar writes: “The act of carrying the cross was a public display of guilt which resulted in ridicule and scorn.”² In the eyes of the world in which Jesus and Peter live and move and have their being, bearing a cross is shameful. And yet, Jesus is insisting that discipleship requires taking up the cross and following where Jesus leads. This is outlandish. This is unheard of. And as the Mandalorian would say, “This is the way.”

It may be the way, Jesus, but goodness this sounds about as diametrically opposed to “Follow your heart,” as it can get. This is not the stuff of gushy graduation cards. This is not what we post on Instagram as proud parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, or family friends. Nor does this sound like the most obvious way to effectively invite new disciples. And yet, as I listen, I hear Jesus offering something no one else does, something no one else truly can: life, good, rich, abundant life. That is what we want after all, for ourselves and for our children and for everyone’s children, right?

Yes, absolutely, I want my child, every child, every person to be happy; I’m guessing you want the same thing. So, we tell them to follow their hearts, to seek out what will make them happy. The pursuit of happiness is written right in the Declaration of Independence after all. And yet, it seems that not many of us are all that skilled in attaining it. We must be taught how to be happy apparently. Happiness is in such demand that Harvard University now offers classes in happiness, including one at the business school entitled, “Managing Happiness.” The subtitle for the course reads, “Happiness is within your control. Write your own ending.” A certificate of completion can be yours for \$229. That sounds like a bargain. But then that pesky Jesus whispers in my ear that a happy life where I write *my* own ending is not necessarily the same thing as a good one.

² Stoffregen, Brian. Exegetical Notes on Mark 8: 27-38. Found on <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/markx27.htm>.

Adam Grant pushes me, too. He reminds me that “Psychologists find the more people value happiness, the less happy they become with their lives.”³ He tells the story of a student who was regretting her decision to attend Wharton where Grant teaches:

She [felt she] had focused too much on getting into the best school and too little on getting the best fit. She wished she had picked a college with a more carefree culture and a stronger sense of community.⁴

The student started making plans to transfer. Within a few weeks, she stopped by to tell Grant she had changed her plans based on a recent class of his. The lightbulb moment did not happen because of Grant’s brilliantly designed presentation on happiness research or because of the in-class exercise he had led them through. No, the clincher for this student was the skit Grant had shared from *Saturday Night Live* starring Adam Sandler as a tour guide who works for a company specializing in tours to Italy. In the spoof commercial, Sandler’s character mentions that some people have given the tours bad reviews, so he decides to clarify what one can and cannot expect from a vacation:

There’s a lot a vacation can do: help you unwind, see some different-looking squirrels, but it cannot fix deeper issues, like how you behave in group settings. We can take you on a hike. We cannot turn you into someone who likes hiking. Remember, you’re still gonna be *you* on vacation. If you are sad where you are, and then you get on a plane to Italy, the you in Italy will be the same sad you from before, just in a new place.⁵

Yes, Mr. Sandler and Dr. Grant, this is true, I would still be the same sad me in Italy, AND there would also be really good bread, pasta, chianti, pizza, and gelato. The point still holds, though. As Grant says,

³ Grant, 237.

⁴ Grant, 238.

⁵ Grant, 238-9.

“when we pursue happiness, we often start by changing our surroundings.”⁶ His student’s a-ha moment was that changing schools would be similar to taking her sad self on a trip to Italy. She took it upon herself to convene conversations with other students which led her to develop close and lasting friendships. He writes:

The impact didn’t stop there, [the student’s] tea gatherings became a tradition for welcoming students who felt out of place. Instead of transferring to a new community, they built their own microcommunity. They weren’t focusing on happiness—they were looking for contribution and connection.⁷

Contribution and connection... Jesus is calling the disciples and any who will listen to look out not strictly for their own well-being, their own happiness, success or survival. He is calling them, calling us to live a life filled with contribution and connection, to give ourselves over to a life of service, generosity, hospitality, and graciousness, to look for ways not to serve our own agenda, but to follow his.

In a few moments we will ordain and install new officers in the class of 2026. On Tuesday evening and earlier this morning, they talked about their faith with members of the current session and with one another. Those conversations are among my favorite things. To hear the energy, the questions, the laughter, the prayerful silence as they discuss life, loss, joy, faith, and service is humbling and lovely. In a bit, they will answer a series of questions, the same questions elders, deacons, and ministers have answered for years in this place and beyond. One of those questions is, “Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?” In other words, will you do your faithful best to follow Jesus, loving those whom he loves and joining in his

⁶ Grant, 239.

⁷ Grant, 240.

work of repairing and redeeming the world? Will you listen for Jesus as you wrestle with budgets and care for buildings? Will you pray for Jesus' guidance as you shape the faith formation of children and adults? Will you keep Jesus front and center as you plan for worship and service and fellowship and study? Will you listen to and look for Jesus as he calls you out into the world to care for the hungry, the unhoused, the hurting, and the lost? Will you give yourself—your heart, your very being—over to this one who gives himself for us?

One of my seminary professors refers to Jesus as God's own heart.⁸ "Take up your cross and follow," God's own heart tells us. The full and good and faithful life is not about following our own hearts, but about following him. And as we follow God's own heart, as we attend to what breaks God's heart and to what makes God's heart sing, I am convinced that God's own heart will shape our own and lead us to our hearts' true home, and we may just find ourselves not simply happier but more joyful than we ever imagined.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁸ Thank you, Dr. Carson Brisson.