



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Time to Move Beyond Book Learning

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 8:31-38

March 13, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This passage follows immediately upon the verses that we read last Sunday. As a reminder, Jesus asked his followers, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter said, “I know you. You are the Christ, the Messiah. You are the one who God promised would come. For generations, God promised you would come and rule in justice and righteousness. You are our leader.”

And almost, as if Jesus had been waiting for this moment, he says to them, “Sit down. There are some things you need to understand. There are some things I need to teach you. I actually have not come to sling power around. I have not come to rule and dominate. That’s the way of this world. I have come to submit to suffering and I will be killed and on the third day, rise.” But then he says, “This is not just my story; it’s also yours. If you follow me, you will know what real life is about, but to know real life, you will need to carry your cross, too.”

It was a hard word. And the truth is: These disciples don’t really get it. Even after Jesus repeats these same words three times, they still don’t get it. It’s a hard word. But Jesus says these things for the same reason he said anything—because he loves them.

When each of our kids turned 13, I took them on a trip. Just the two of us. My friend Brant gave me the idea; he did the same thing with each of his boys. The trip was nothing fancy. Sarah wanted to go to New York; we went to Branson. Nathan and I went to St. Louis. We had a good time. Sarah and I went to some shows and ate dinner on the paddle boat—the Branson Belle. Nathan and I played golf and took in a couple of baseball games. But the purpose of the trip was to talk. I told them, “You are getting older and there are some things I need you to know.” I shared with them some things I thought were important. It was fatherly wisdom—as much as I had anyway. I made

four points. Sarah still talks about the four things. I was trying to talk to them about real life, so some of it was hard, but I said everything I said because they are among the people I love most in the world.

I read these moments in Jesus’ ministry and it seems like he sits his disciples down almost like his children. It is as if he says, “You have come this far now, so it’s time for you to understand some things. There are some things I need to teach you. You cannot be truly human in this world apart from sacrifice. It’s not for the sake of sacrifice; it’s for relationship.” If I understand the text, Jesus is telling them that faith shows up in their choices. Jesus makes it clear that the faith that leads to meaningful life is not something we simply *think*. It’s something that must be lived—that must be *practiced*.

Remember my grandfather, the one I told you about last week, who wouldn’t go see Dr. Shealy because he didn’t pass Mrs. Amick’s fourth-grade class? That same grandfather was fond of saying, “I’m not a big fan of book learning; I learned my best lessons in the school of life.” I don’t know all the details, but I know that both of his parents died before he was in middle school, so school-of-life lessons for him began as a preteen. I admire him because he scratched out a life. It was simple and modest, but he raised two boys to be good men, and interestingly enough, he made sure they went to college to get a bit of that book learning he was so skeptical of.

I think about him sometimes when I sit in my office, which is as much of a library as anything else. There are a few thousand books in there. I read from one (or more) every day. My grandfather and I are not much alike. I am actually a fan of the wisdom one can gain through study and critical reflection. I admire Socrates, who said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

But my grandfather had a point. For all of us, there is a wisdom that can only be known through practice. I don't think Jesus would say the unexamined life is not worth living; I think he would say the uncommitted life is not worth living.¹ If I understand the text, Jesus says faith is not something we think; it is something we practice. It's like riding a bike or learning to swim. You can think about it, but you can't learn to swim without getting wet. You can't learn to ride a bike without putting your feet on the pedals. Faith is like that, too. It must show up in our relationships. And here's what Jesus is pointing to: relationships, if they are going to be meaningful, they will require sacrifice. If I understand the text, cross-bearing is not some endurance test or self-inflicted pain for no reason; cross-bearing is a relationship reality. Relationships require sacrifice.

Several years ago, my wife Carol, said to me, "Tom Are, there are some wonderful things about you." "Well, thanks, babe. Thank you so much. That means a lot to me." She said, "Well, good, but there's more. You should know that I am having to focus very intently on those good things because if I didn't, some of the other, less wonderful things about you might drive me crazy."

Oh, relationships take sacrifice. If you don't know what I'm talking about, just wait. It's coming.

I was a young pastor; Nathan hadn't even been born yet. Joe was an elder in the church with grown children and lots of grandchildren. They all came home for Christmas one year. I saw them on Christmas Eve, filling up a whole pew, grandchildren everywhere. They looked so happy.

A couple of Sundays later, I asked Joe, "How was it having everybody home for Christmas?" He paused. "It was good, it really was, but I got to tell you, the best Christmas lights are tail lights." Relationships require sacrifice.

You know that. And you also know this: We are motivated to sacrifice for those who are closest to us. We are motivated to sacrifice for the relationships that mean the most to us. Every parent knows this truth. Every spouse knows the requirement of sacrifice. Every friendship that lasts can tell the story of sacrifice. It is holy and faithful and it can be so hard.

That's why Christ tells us: If you want to know what a meaningful life is, you will have to carry your own cross from time to time.

But I think there is more here, too. I think the invitation of Christ is to *broaden* that circle for whom we are willing to sacrifice. To engage in sacrifice for those a bit farther from us—and see what God might do with that sacrifice.

I read about Volodymyr Bondarenko who spends most of his day holed up in his apartment in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. Between air-raid sirens and scrambling for food, he is communicating with people from America. Language barriers make it hard, so often he sends emojis that express tears or 'praying hands.' He is communicating with people who are renting his one-bedroom apartment in the heart of Kyiv. They have found him—and countless others on Airbnb—and they are renting the rooms they have no intention of ever using. It's just a way to send money to civilians caught in Putin's war. Last week, in a two-day period, it is reported that Americans booked more than 30,000 nights in the Ukraine. And all Mr. Bondarenko can do is send grateful emojis.

There are two ways to look at this. It can be a service, a benevolence. Some people are sending money to other people in need. That's a good thing—limited as it may be.

But the church has taught me another way to look at this. It's the action that happens when there is an awakening to the humanity in another. We recognize that we are connected, even distantly, so we are willing to broaden the circle of sacrifice. I say the church has taught me this because the church has never existed apart from mission. Sometimes we do mission as service; we give resources and say, 'bless you.'

But that has never been our most satisfying mission. No, time and again, Village Church has pushed the circle wider to see the humanity in folks whose lives are dramatically different from our own. And when we have, we've done a little cross-bearing and we wouldn't have it any other way.

More than 25 years ago, Andy Wilson—a man I never knew, but one who changed my life—took some youth to the Dominican Republic. He started a relationship, a friendship, that has changed many

¹ I think William Sloane Coffin said this, but I cannot find the citation at present. It is not original to me.

lives here at Village and in the D.R. And today, some of our youth are in the Dominican Republic who were not even born when that first trip occurred, but they are continuing this relationship. And the people in the D.R. need us, desperately, but we need them, too. We have become more willing to sacrifice for one another.

And this is just one of the many ways that Village lives the mission of Jesus Christ. I could talk about our relationship with Faxon Elementary, I could talk about Thelma's Kitchen and our new friendship with Artists Helping Homeless... the list goes on.

You know what I'm saying. Relationships require sacrifice, if they are going to matter, anyway. Jesus sits his friends down and says, "I need to tell you something, and it's not easy, but if you try this, if you trust this, if you lean into this... God blesses that life and you would give everything to be part of that."

Now, the truth is: They didn't get it—at least not right away. He told them three times and still they didn't get it. They thought faith was supposed to make life comfortable. But Jesus said: No, not comfortable, just blessed. They didn't get it, but I think you know what Jesus is talking about.