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Mark 8: 27-38

## National Bishop Susan Johnson

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*Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

*Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'*

*He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'*

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Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus. I bring you greetings from your siblings in Christ from coast to coast to coast that make up this part of God's family we know as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

The verse from today's gospel lesson I want to focus on is "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Deny yourself and take up your cross is certainly a countercultural message to the society that surrounds us.

Today's culture celebrates "indulging oneself," not "denying oneself." It has a "look after number one attitude" not a "take care of the needs of others attitude."

At the National Worship conference this year I attended a workshop by Adrian Jacobs who put it this way – "it's a hard time to live in a good way."

Walter Brueggemann's prayer "The voice we can scarcely hear" also speaks to this:

*You are the voice we can scarcely hear  
because you speak to us about dying and suffering,  
and we are impacted by so many voices  
that have to do with power  
and competence  
and success.*

*We do know that you are the voice that gives life,  
that you are the voice that opens futures to people who are hopeless.*

*We are a part of a hopeless people,  
because the other voices eat at our hearts,  
and we are immobilized  
and we become deaf.*

*So we pray for new ears.*

*We pray that your voice may be more audible to us,  
that we may be able to sort out the death-giving  
from the life-giving voices among us.*

*We pray in the name of Jesus,  
through whom you have spoken  
in such inscrutable ways.*

*Amen.*

So why does this sentence bother us so much? "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Partly that we don't have experience with crosses these days. We understand historical references, and we understand pietistic ones that describe all of life's burdens as crosses to bear. And although there are people still today dying for their faith, that is not going to happen to you or I.

Partly because this is the starkest description of what it means to follow Jesus that Jesus uses. Jesus describes what it means to follow him in many other ways. Leave your boats and nets and follow me. Feed the hungry and follow me. Heal the sick and follow me. Welcome all and follow me. Love God and neighbour and follow me. Speak truth to power and follow me.

These are not as scary sounding as taking up your cross, but they are still costly things to do. They mean putting God's will first ahead of our own. They take up our time, our money, and our effort.

So how are you answering God's call to follow? Perhaps you are being called to a new vocation? Perhaps you are already working in your congregations feeding program or donating to CLWR or a local food bank. Perhaps you are a health care worker. Perhaps you are taking racial justice training to make sure that you are truly welcoming. Perhaps you are serving neighbours through community service. Perhaps you are advocating for better health care, or an end to war, or that we would provide welcome to refugees.

You may already be taking up your cross and following! Sometimes it is tempting to put those crosses down. Life might seem easier. But life would not be as life-giving, and we would end up drifting away from the one who gives us life.

Part of what helps us keep going, keep taking up our cross, keep following Jesus, is that we are called into community to support each other in our following and our serving. This week, find someone you see following Jesus and thank them for their service. You may be surprised how many followers you find once you start looking.

Blessings to each of you as you strive to follow Jesus with the gifts and talents you have been given. Blessings to each of you as you resist the temptation of selfishness that pervades our society. Amen.