

Mark 8:27-9:1 Faith, Love, and Hope Preached on Oct. 1, 2006

The sermon in a sentence: Faith in Jesus the Christ leads to a life of love, sustained by hope.

Why I am preaching it: As a follow-up to the Lord's Supper, to remind us of the basics of our faith.

I am glad that we came to these verses in Mark today. Communion Sunday is a good opportunity to reflect a little on the basics of our faith, and this is the perfect passage in Mark to do that reflection.

If somebody told you that you had to summarize the Christian faith in three words, what would you say? I think I would say, "Jesus is Lord." Now let's make it a little tougher. What if you had to use three nouns to summarize the Christian faith? I would follow Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, the famous love chapter, and use Faith, Hope, and Love.

Those three, faith, hope, and love, form a framework for today's passage, and also for today's message, although we will look at them in a slightly different order: first faith, then love, and then hope. We will see the growing faith of the disciples, as they began to comprehend that Jesus was the Christ, the one sent by God. We will also consider our own faith in Jesus. Then we will consider Jesus' powerful description of the life of Christian discipleship, which is the life of love. And finally, the passage ends with a word of hope that kept the disciples going and can keep us going in the life of love when things get tough.

Let's start with faith, with faith in Jesus. Everything in the Gospel of Mark has led up to this moment. Jesus had called the Twelve to be with him, and to learn from him. They had heard him preach, they had seen him perform miracles, they themselves had even gone out to preach and to heal in his name. They were on the right track. But there was still a disturbing lack of faith in Jesus. In the passage that Pastor Wayne preached on last week, they couldn't trust him even to provide them with a little bread. The passage ends with Jesus asking his disciples, "Do you still not understand?" Mark doesn't tell us how they answered him, or even if they answered at all.

Time was short. John the Baptist had already been executed, and Jesus knew that he would be next. As Pastor Wayne mentioned last week, Jesus had

powerful enemies among the religious and the political leaders—the Pharisees and the Herodians. Their hearts were hardened against him. Certainly they had no faith in him. The future of his ministry would soon depend upon the faith of his disciples. But what about the disciples? The question that Jesus had asked them, “Do you still not understand?” was left hanging, and he needed an answer.

He started by asking what the crowds thought of him. Three answers are given: maybe he was John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets. But at the root, these three answers were all the same. John, Elijah, and the other prophets all pointed the way to the Messiah, or the Christ. So in the popular mind, Jesus was one more in the line of prophets who pointed the way to God’s anointed or chosen one.

Then Jesus gets more personal with his disciples. “What about you? Who do you say that I am?” Peter responded, “You are the Christ.” He got it right.

We should never underestimate Peter’s answer. *Christ* in Greek and *Messiah* in Hebrew both mean God’s chosen one, the one the prophets had foretold for centuries, the savior of the nation. This is the One they have been waiting for. Apparently Peter was the first of the disciples to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah. His faith in Jesus as the Christ was to become the bedrock not only of his own life, but of the whole Christian church. The next few verses show us that Peter still had a lot of maturing ahead of him, but the fact remains that he had faith in Jesus the Christ. The rest of his life would be spent in understanding more deeply that basic commitment to Jesus Christ.

The question put to Peter is also put to us. Who do we say that Jesus is? Whose supper did we just participate in? Who died for our sins? One of my hopes for Makiki is that everybody who attends here regularly, every child who grows up in our Sunday School will know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, the only one who had sufficient love and sufficient power to die for our sins. May our answer be Peter’s answer. Jesus, you are the Christ. And may everything that goes on in this church point us in one way or another to a deeper love for Jesus, the Christ, our Lord and Savior.

According to the passage, Jesus was kind enough to correct Peter’s misunderstanding privately. Then he called the crowd and the disciples to

him in order to teach them. Yes, he was the Messiah. But the way of the Messiah was not conquest. It was self-giving love. And just as the Christ was going to give up his life for their sake, so they would need to give up their lives for his sake.

To deny ourselves, to take up our cross, to follow Jesus, and to lose our lives for his sake are all different ways of saying the same thing. They are all ways of describing love.

When we hear of denying ourselves, of taking up our cross and of losing our lives for Jesus' sake, we might have visions of martyrs being burned at the stake, or of Christians spending years in prison for their faith. And that kind of sacrifice has occurred throughout Christian history. It occurs today.

But Jesus chose his words carefully. "If anyone would come after me," he said. The way of self denial, of death to self, the way of love is not just for the martyrs. It is for any and every follower of Jesus. It was and is for all Christians. It is for us.

Jesus' followers are generally ordinary people living in ordinary times. For most of us, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and losing our lives will work themselves out in pretty undramatic ways. Let me give a few examples.

Here's one that happens every day. Christian husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for her. What will that look like for a husband who has just picked up the sports section of the paper, and his wife has had a hard day and wants to talk about it?

Here's another. This week I got an e-mail from a friend about minor irritations at work: things like not being appreciated for his efforts, things like being expected to do things that are not his responsibility. He wanted to respond in a way that honored God. It struck me that 95% or more of the Christian life, of the life of love, has to do with responding to those little irritations with patience, with kindness, with our focus more on Jesus than on ourselves.

Here is another ordinary example. We know that all our material possessions are on loan from God, to be used in a way that brings joy to him. At a Joint Ministry Council last week a member recalled a time a number of years ago

when our church was running a substantial deficit. Somebody calculated that if every member drank one less cup of Starbucks a week, or bought one less People Magazine a week and gave the money to the church, the deficit would be wiped out.

Don't get me wrong. If I were to say that being a Christian just meant giving up the sports pages or People Magazine, or forcing ourselves to be nice, I would be making two huge mistakes. For one, I would be falling right into the legalism of the Pharisees. And Jesus has already warned his disciples against the yeast of the Pharisees. For another, I would be making trivial the sacrifice of Jesus that we just remembered at the Lord's Supper.

God has much greater plans for us than just becoming nicer people. God's glorious plan is to renew creation, to undo the damage done by sin. And his primary instrument in effecting this kind of transformation is his people, his bride, his church. Ordinary people who are more interested in Jesus than they are in themselves. Ordinary congregations that get more excited about God's plan than about their own comfort and convenience.

The Christian life is much more than putting down the sports page and lending a listening ear. It is much more than cutting personal spending in order to give more to God's work. But the Christian life, the life of love, is not less than those things.

You can interview people whom God has used to move his plan forward at a national or even an international level. You can read about societies that were changed when they saw the courage of Christian martyrs.

But as you dig deeper into those moving stories, you will find that before their moments of dramatic service such people already had a history of quiet self-denial, of giving up their own wills and preferences for the sake of Jesus. Congregations that transform their communities are made up of ordinary people who in everyday ways love God and love their neighbors.

So being a Christian is built on faith in Jesus, the Christ, the one whose sacrifice we remember at the Lord's Supper. As followers of Jesus we live a life characterized by love, according to the particular gifts and circumstances that make up our lives.

Whether God calls us to an ordinary life lived with extraordinary love or whether he chooses to use us in some more dramatic way, we will find that we sometimes grow tired. Sometimes our faith will waver. Sometimes the wide and easy road of looking out for ourselves will seem so much easier and more attractive than the narrow road of love.

How can we keep going when faith and love falter? The answer comes at the very end of the passage: "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." Followers of Jesus live in hope. Scholars have differing opinions on what Jesus was referring to here, but I think he meant his resurrection. Although the first Lord's Supper with the disciples occurred before the resurrection, all of them except Judas lived to see it from the other side of the empty tomb. Jesus is the Christ. He poured out his life in love. And then he rose. In our case we look back on the resurrection, but we also have the hope that Jesus will return in power to do away with sin. Paul tells us to celebrate the Lord's Supper until Jesus returns.

That was the disciples' faith, love, and hope, and it is ours as well. Faith in Jesus the Christ. A life lived in love, dying to our own will and demands. And then the hope of the resurrection, and of the day when Jesus will return.

Let us pray.