**Text**: Mark 8:31-38

**The Bethel Pulpit**

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31  Then he (Jesus) 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. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But 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.”

34  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. 35For 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,[\*](javascript:void(0);) will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words[\*](javascript:void(0);) 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.” The Gospel of the Lord.

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I want to spend some time today talking about a person some/many of you may know - Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, teacher, and author. He was born in 1905 and grew up surrounded by a loving family. As Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party grew in popularity and power in Germany in the 1930’s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to speak out against them – one of his primary criticisms of the Nazi party was their program of genocidal persecution of Jewish people. Bonhoeffer did not back down from his criticism of Hitler and the Nazis and finally, after pleas from family and friends and warnings from the Gestapo, he was arrested in 1943. For 1 ½ years he was imprisoned at Tegel prison. Later he was transferred to Flossenburg Concentration Camp, where he was accused of being associated with a plot to kill Adolf Hitler. After a brief trial where he was found guilty, he was hanged to death on April 9, 1945.

In his 39 years, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote and preached about the great challenges and the great joys that come with following Jesus. If one book captures Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s passion, faithfulness, and brilliance, it is, The Cost of Discipleship, first published in 1937.

The Cost of Discipleship is considered a modern classic and within its pages the reader quickly discovers the depth and seriousness, the urgency and passion of Bonhoeffer’s faith. The reader also very quickly discovers that Bonhoeffer is not easily intimidated. The first chapter is titled, “Costly Grace,” and he begins by stating, “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace.” This was a harsh warning to his own church, which at the time was in the midst of serious conflict with the official “Nazified” state church. The chapter continues by outlining what costly grace is.

“…grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son … and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God (God taking on human form in the person of Jesus). ”

It may come as no shock to you that discipleship is the focus of this book. And while that is perhaps not shocking, the way Bonhoeffer speaks about discipleship somehow reaches many people – me included – in ways that few other writers do.

Moving to the fourth chapter, which is titled, “Discipleship and the Cross,” we find a passage from the Gospel of Mark – Mark 8:31-38 (it is our Gospel for today). This reading from Mark is not one of my favorites. My reasoning is fairly simple – best summed up by Mark Twain when he said, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

These are words that make feel accountable - they challenge me, they frighten me, they overwhelm me. But most of all, these words call me to task as a follower of Jesus, and it seems that whenever that happens, I come up looking not so good. Maybe you feel the same way.

“If any want to become my followers,” Jesus said, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For 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,[\*](javascript:void(0);) will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

If our hope in reading the 4th chapter of The Cost of Discipleship is that the anxiety that we might feel from the weightiness of Jesus’ words in Mark 8 will be decreased, we will be greatly disappointed. In fact, if anything, it seems that Bonhoeffer amps what it means to take up your cross and follow Jesus.

“If our Christianity has ceased to be serious about discipleship,” he says, “if we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift which makes no costly demands and which fails to distinguish between natural and Christian existence, then we cannot help regarding the cross as an ordinary everyday calamity, as one of the trials and tribulations of life. We have then forgotten that the cross means rejection and shame as well as suffering.”

And just a few paragraphs later Bonhoeffer says, “The cross is laid on every Christian … As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death – we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man or woman, he bids him or her come and die.”

Those are not easy words, are they? Discipleship – following Jesus – means something so serious to Bonhoeffer – something so impactful and necessary to his life and his being – that I am left feeling very inadequate. Bonhoeffer’s words about being a follower of Jesus accuse me – they convict me – but that is not all that they do. His words do something else and that something else is that they somehow invite me to continue to learn and grow. His words are less judgment and more strong encouragement – they serve as some kind of invitation to keep coming back to again be challenged and to again wrestle with what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

I pulled out my copy of The Cost of Discipleship from the bookshelf in my office and began re-reading it recently because of that something else; that subtle, gentle invitation that does not ignore my failings as a disciple, but invites me all the same to continue on in the struggle to take up my cross and to follow. Bonhoeffer reminds me as I read his words that there is a cost in doing that – in taking up my cross and following Jesus. It is not a trifle thing to take up mu cross and follow, it is not something to be taken lightly or done without thoughtful consideration.

The cost of discipleship for Dietrich Bonhoeffer was great – it was his life; which makes the words that he wrote about taking up your cross and following Jesus all the more powerful. As I think about all that this man did, I become overwhelmed; of course I also become grieved, frustrated, captivated, perplexed, and finally, I become motivated.

Bonhoeffer’s willingness to take up his cross and follow nudges me into action – it kind of kicks me in the rear and pushes me out of my comfort zone and into places that I would rather not go, to meet people I would rather not meet.

This week, as I have thought about Jesus’ call to each of us to take up our cross and follow him coupled with Bonhoeffer’s words stating the importance of that call and the importance of taking that call seriously, I have asked myself what does all that mean in the wake of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida?

Last Sunday I picked up my son, Caleb, from youth group. What do you think is going to happen to the boy – you know, the one who killed everyone? I told him that I supposed that he would either spend the rest of his life in prison or be put to death. “Yeah,” Caleb said, “that sounds about right.” We went on to talk about the whole terrible situation that took place in Florida – the tragedy that touched and will continue to touch people for a long time. We wondered what could have been different in that boy’s life that would have prevented what he did. What if one or two or three more people did something positive in his life – what if someone else took up his or her cross – what might that have done?

What does taking up my cross – your cross – look like in the midst of that school shooting or any other school shooting that has happened recently or any other act of violence, for that matter? What does it mean for each of us as we live in our communities and as we interact with people each and every day? What does it mean when we enter the voting booth or when we pass by someone who is asking for money at a street corner? What does taking up our cross look like when reason and decorum, kindness and compassion seem to be viewed as weaknesses by virtually everyone, including our elected officials?

What does taking up our cross and following Jesus look like today? While it depends upon who we are, where we are and many other things, I know where it begins. It begins where there is injustice, where there is hatred, where there is intolerance, indifference, racism. It begins where powerless people are dismissed by powerful people. It begins where truth is rejected by falsehood. It begins wherever and whenever hope is stifled and not allowed to grow and develop.

When we take up our cross and follow Jesus we may not know where our journey will lead us (Bonhoeffer makes that absolutely clear), but we do know that the journey calls on us to seek out those places where wrong is taking place/where evil is winning the day, and to then do what is right, to stand against that evil, to reject hatred, to oppose violence, to seek justice. That is not easy to do – not at all easy – yet that is what it looks like to take up our cross and follow.

That is all that Dietrich Bonhoeffer did – nothing more and nothing less. Which is both comforting and terrifying. Each time I open up The Cost of Discipleship and begin to read, I find myself evaluating my faith and wondering if I have the courage inside me to stand firm in the face of a powerful force of evil. I do not know. But I know that we have a Savior who is worth following; a Savior who died for us. I hope I can take up my cross and follow, because I know Jesus did exactly that for me. Amen.