A Sermon for Dayspring

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**Greetings**

On behalf of the Ekklesia Project board of directors I want to thank the DaySpring congregation for your warm welcome on a cold and almost forbidding Texas weekend. I don’t want to thank you too finally, though, because it’s not yet clear that any of us is going anywhere. (Some of the people in this room are still scheduled to fly in this morning.)

The Ekklesia Project is a gathering of friends, old and new, who believe in God’s church and come together to foster its healing and wholeness, and its revealing as the sign and foretaste of the reign of God. Our board comes to you from Catholic parishes in West Virginia, Ohio, Georgia, and Illinois; from a Cumberland Presbyterian congregation in San Francisco; United Methodist congregations in West Virginia, Florida, Maryland, and Tennessee; Christian churches (Stone Campbell tradition) in Indianapolis and Michigan; Baptist congregations in North Carolina, Mississippi, and Texas; an Episcopal parish near Jackson, Tennessee; a free Methodist church in Pasadena, CA; and from well, the Church of the Servant King, an old-style New Monastic congregation in Eugene, Oregon.

You cannot know how much you have already contributed to our work by sending us Victor, Lynne, Miriam, and Monica Hinojosa, Barry and Sarah Harvey, and also Cole Chandler. We invite you to join us in our work and in our annual gatherings, but we also hope and trust that our work serves the good work God has already so obviously begun among you.

I’ve heard it said that the purpose of architecture is to take ordinary space and reveal it to be sacred space. And this is a revealing place where we are a worshiping together. It is a privilege to be here with you.

I’m the Baptist pastor from Mississippi, and because of flight cancellations I finally just gave up and drove here Friday night, and I was glad I did because I got to drive through Corsicana, and I realized I was following the route that the beloved Mississippi author Willie Morris must have taken on his way to Austin many years ago. Willie Morris famously tried to determine when the South ended, and the West began, and he wound up drawing the line in Corsicana, Texas because he said it was the last town going west that had a Confederate memorial in the square. So, I was very glad to be officially leaving the South and entering into this other place called the West. I understand it is a different place where one can speak freely and plainly, so let us not speak falsely now in this late hour.

**A Sermon for DaySpring**

**Mark 8:31-38**

Let us pray: To you Lord Christ, we bend our knees and all our worshiping, our minds and all our thinking, our hearts, and all our loving, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

About a year after a tsunami devastated much of Sri Lanka, I met Kingsley Perrera at a national Baptist gathering. Kinglsey was the president of the Baptist Sangamaya or Union of Sri Lanka, in the states to visit with potential partners in the aftermath of the tsunami. And when I invited him to Mississippi, he asked me if I could take him to one particular small church in rural Alabama. This one small church had sent a noticeable offering to the Sangamaya after the tsunami, and Kingsley had the impression that the offering was given out of poverty, and he wanted to meet them.

So, he came to Mississippi, and I drove him to Alabama, and on our way he told me about the role of the indigenous church in Sri Lanka in the midst of violent ethnic rivalry between two historic peoples. (Something about driving across Mississippi and Alabama prompted him to reflect on ethnic division.) In Sri Lanka there are the Tamil people, a minority ethnic group who are predominantly Hindu. Perhaps you’ve heard of the Tamil Tigers. They are a guerilla liberation movement that has sought an independent Tamil state.

And they want to be free of the Sinhala, who are the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka, predominantly Buddhist. It turns out that Baptist churches have made a small but beautiful offering toward the peace of their scattered neighborhoods. Largely unnoticed what Kingsley described was beautiful: Tamil Christians and Sinhala Christians living together as one body in scattered neighborhoods across a bitterly divided and wounded land.

Can we pause just one minute to allow the Baptists in the room the opportunity to enjoy that news? These Baptist churches, who trace their beginnings to William Carey, see themselves as something of an outpost of peace in the midst of violent ethnic division. They are Tamil and Sinhala, they are Sri Lankans, but their primary allegiance is to the reign of God in Christ.

Let’s allow our Ekklesia Project friends a moment to enjoy this because it is a reality, but we have sometimes needed to look hard for examples of it. There does exist the church whose identity is governed not by ethnic identity or national identity . . . but sometimes we feel like Abraham and Sarah, that is, crazy to believe in the future of such a people, much less its presence.

So, we were on our way to Alabama, and Kingsley was telling me more about how Baptists have come to be people of peace, and we were discussing this one potential danger: A radical nationalist wing of the majority Buddhist Sinhala group was pushing legislation that would make any religious conversion illegal, punishable by imprisonment. And this was obviously a concern for the Baptists because they fostered conversion to the way of Jesus. I asked Kingsley what the Sangamaya would do if that measure passed, and he paused for just a breath before replying, plainly, “Suffer.” He said, simply, “Suffer.”

And then we were silent for several minutes. I was of course stunned by his answer, as obvious as it was, or because it was so obvious but I hadn’t imagined it as an option. And then after several minutes Kingsley finally broke the silence by asking, “Who was it that said, ‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church?’”

I want to pardon Peter for his own incredulity at Jesus’ announcement 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.” That is officially hard to swallow. It takes your breath away to consider that the way of our salvation involves the suffering of God’s servants.

So, of course Peter resisted this teaching: because it is so very counterintuitive, so shocking, and so inconceivable. We would be surprised if he took it any other way because this is no way for a Messiah to act. A Messiah is an agent sent from God, a savior sent to rescue God’s people. Peter has been watching Jesus exercise power to heal, power to forgive, power to liberate, and power to feed, and he thinks he knows what a Messiah is supposed to do to save us. Just like you and I think we know what a Messiah ought to do.

But Jesus is not quite as easy on Peter as I am. Perhaps he does not like being rebuked by a student, so Jesus turns and rebukes Peter. And this is a very strong word. This is not polite disagreement. This is not nice.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is not the kind of teacher that says you tell me your thoughts about God, and I’ll tell you my thoughts about God, and we’ll together enjoy some speculation about how good it is to be among people with deep thoughts about God. No, this is a master confronting a student who does not know what he is saying. This is Jesus telling us that “God is not . . .” who we would be if we were in charge.

This is the undeniable turning point of the Gospel, and incredibly it hinges on Jesus actually turning and getting in his disciples face: “But turning and looking at his disciples Jesus rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’”

So, since we are in the West, I want to offer a very plain and straightforward sermonic point, and I warn you one last time this is not subtle: discipleship requires discipleship.

I know, that’s not the most-subtle sermonic point you’ve ever heard, but it actually comes straight from Jesus in this text. In a rather awkward way of putting it Jesus calls out to the larger crowd, “If any wan to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” In other words, “If you want to follow me, you need to follow me. Discipleship requires discipleship.” I know that seems obvious, but it’s crucial to see and actually easy to miss.

Discipleship is a process of conversion, change, and transformation. This is not about following the Messiah we think the world needs. If we knew and wanted what the world needs to be saved, we would not need to be saved. But we do not want what God wants, and we do not know this God who is not who we would be if we were given the reigns of power.

So, discipleship is required - a patient, disciplined, conversion of the imagination and transformation of desire. And this is where the whole gospel of Mark turns, when Jesus literally turns and looks at his chief disciple and says, “Get in line and follow. You do not know what you’re talking about.”

This summer our Ekklesia Project gathering will be devoted to a topic that we have found to be so important that we agreed yesterday to stretch it out to two years: that is, we want to learn more about the way young people are raised within faithful congregations to be disciples. We know it’s happening, but we believe it deserves some attention.

A few years back there was a massive study of young people of faith in the U.S. that revealed unfortunately that a great number of young people raised within the faith do not know how to make a gospel confession of faith. In fact the results of the study led some to come up with the name of a non-gospel faith that we do seem to be passing on to our kids. They called it “moralistic, therapeutic deism.” And this is how they described in general the contours of the faith they were hearing from young people of faith all across this country.

These are kids who were raised in churches, and they could only articulate a faith that was basically moralistic: it was about being good, having values, and fitting in. It was therapeutic: faith was for them a way to comfortably adjust and thrive within our culture. And it was a kind of deism. The God they described was a vague and distant deity – perhaps the kind of god we would be if we were in charge, but not the kind of God who would suffer and die and then rise with healing in his hands.

So, we want to learn from those congregations like Dayspring who are raising young people of robust faith, a faith that follows a vulnerable and human Savior into our neighborhoods, in order to live in the midst of our neighbors as a witness to God’s peace. We want to learn how to foster a faith that leans toward the future, which is here already, in the broken body of Christ, shared in very real communities of human beings on the way, on this journey of discipleship.

Somewhere in the winter of 2000 or 2001 I was leading a Sunday evening study with some youth at my church in Jackson. We were talking about bodies – what they are, what they’re for, and whose they are, and it occurred to me to use the term “pick up your cross” in this discussion, and when I did I noticed a strange shared look of incomprehension. It takes a trained eye to tell the difference between an ordinary youth group blank stare and confusion, but I took it to be the latter, which is progress. So, I asked the group to turn to Mark 8, and after we got all their Bibles turned right-side up, and we helped them find the New Testament, we read this passage together. But that group still claimed they’d never heard this stuff before. I just didn’t believe it.

So, we talked about the cross. I tried to ask them what they thought this meant to take up a cross and follow Jesus. Was a cross just some nagging ailment that we were supposed to bear with dignity, was it an annoying family member we were supposed to just deal with? Or was the cross the price you pay for saying Yes to the new in Christ? (This is where I was trying to go.)

Was the cross what happens when disciples say Yes, and the world issues its resounding No (to quote James McClendon)? I really had a sense that they knew this stuff better than they claimed to know it, but they left claiming ignorance.

But then a few months later something interesting came up in Mississippi. In the spring of 2001 somebody discovered that our Mississippi flag that includes a Confederate battle flag in the corner, was not really official. When we ratified a new constitution in 1908 we had forgotten to officially adopt the flag. (Mississippi does this kind of thing.) So, we had this brief opening, and a brief moment when a lot of people stepped up and out to say this is a moment we should seize to adopt a new flag. And there a few weeks of really hopeful rallying around this new image, and then we voted on April 17, and the measure lost 65-35. It was a resounding NO issued from an age that died a long time ago, but still has its grips on us.

I woke up on April 18, and it felt like the world was in black and white. This happened to be the day I was scheduled to visit one of our local private schools for lunch. I drug myself dutifully into the cafeteria, not really feeling like being there that day, and I happened upon a surprising scene. There were the members of our small youth group, those same people of the blank stares, sitting at their lunch tables, enduring scorn, and ridicule, and laughter.

These kids had obviously been proponents of something new, but they had lost, and now their peers were openly laughing at them. They wore grimaces on their faces, and passed each other only furtive glances. I discovered that one of them had checked out of school that day rather than have her class picture taken with the flag flying in the background. I sat down at that table with this small group of beleaguered disciples, and I said, “This is what a cross is. I think this is what we were talking about.”

Discipleship requires discipleship. This is not about following a God we already have figured out. It’s about being confronted by and called by a God who would overhaul our very imaginations. But here’s the shocking news. It’s happening. It is happening in our very midst. It’s happening in Dayspring Baptist Church right now. It’s happening in Mississippi. It’s happening from San Francisco to the Chesapeake Bay.

And what are we to make of the fact that we are now talking again about martyrs? Christian martyrs. Those 21 Coptic Christians who died recently at the hands of ISIS have been called martyrs. My guess is they were not super Christians. My guess is they were ordinary Christians, regular disciples, but they died mouthing the words to the confession: “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Discipleship is happening. Around the world disciples are following Jesus and finding their imaginations being rewritten and their very desires transformed. It’s not always fast, but it’s happening. It’s not usually fast, but in it God is at work, to save us, to heal us, to make us whole.

Peter quite obviously does not get Jesus. But one of the most surprising features of this story is that apparently no one walked away, including Peter. They kept following, flawed as they were, and so shall we. Amen.

1. These remarks tie into one of the major arguments of Brent Laytham’s important book *God is Not . . . Religious Nice, “One of Us,” An American, A Capitali*st (Brazos Press, 2004). Brent was present in the room and had been honored at the meeting by the Ekklesia Project board at the completion of his tenure as Coordinator. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)