

2009 Global Mission Lenten Series

Week Two Reflection

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Mark 8: 31-38

An early lesson one learns when living and working outside of the United States, is that not everything can be translated. I once tried to use this statement from Yogi Berra, the New York Yankees baseball great. “If you come to a fork in the road, take it.” It took a little bit of explaining.

In retrospect I should have used Mark 8 to express what I meant. This chapter is a theological fork in the road. First, chapter 8 is the hinge of Mark’s gospel. Not only is this the exact middle of Mark in terms of chapters and verses, it is also theologically the center point at which the ministry of Jesus takes a decisive turn toward the cross. Jesus seems to know what he is doing and also where he is going. Or, better said, where Jesus must go whether he wants to go or not. For the disciples, too, Mark 8 presents a kind of fork in the road. However, the disciples want it both ways. They want to stick with Jesus and be his followers while at the same time insisting that Jesus follow them down the path they want him to take.

Thus, Mark 8 is truly an appropriate lesson for Lent. Lent is a time for us to consider our lives, and to be willing to do some heavy duty pruning, if needed, in order to bring our lives into line with the will of God. It’s a season of sacrifice, of repentance, of turning away from damaging patterns of living, and turning back to Christian obedience. To summarize, it is a season to follow Jesus instead of insisting that Jesus follow us. That’s why this text is timely because, among other things, it reveals to us something we already know but don’t like to admit: it is difficult to be a follower.

As a missionary, one might expect that “following” is easy. Not to be overly dramatic, but to be a missionary involves the age old struggle, grief and loss when we leave family, friends, culture and much to follow God’s call to preach, teach and share the gospel “to all nations.” But, from my experience, possibly an even greater struggle is to listen, learn and respond to what it means to follow as a Christian in a host land, church and culture. In our case, that is the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church in Nagoya, Japan.

I remember vividly after my arrival, the moment I thought about what “following” in Japan may mean for me. After about six months adjusting to the surroundings and my work as pastor of an English speaking congregation, (Meito Christ International Church) and as a missionary serving a local church (Nagoya-Kibo Lutheran Church), I was at our team pastors’ meeting. In our meeting we were discussing one of the ministries of the congregation: a preschool and kindergarten located at one of the congregation’s three mission sites. At this particular meeting, the two Japanese pastors I work with asked if I would be willing to teach Bible classes in English at the school.

Initially, I was surprised by that request. Although I am comfortable leading children’s messages

as part of worship and have taught Confirmation classes for a number of years, teaching 3 to 5 year olds in another language on the topic of the Bible was going to be a unique challenge. Furthermore, I was puzzled by how this was using my gifts and talents in the best possible way, much less my time. As I prayerfully considered the request, I realized the difficulty in “following.”

Having been a pastor in the United States for over a dozen years before coming to Japan, I knew the difficulty many people had with being stretched to share their gifts and talents in mission and ministry. As I considered the request, I remembered how many times I had in sermons, talks and conversations challenged my listeners to take up the needs of mission and ministry. More often than not, not only did I hear the words, “No, Pastor, I do not feel I can do that!” But also, I sensed the perspective of many was that somehow I was coming with the perspective of “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (Mark 8:33b)

Now, here I was the one being challenged to be a “follower” and to trust in the needs of these pastors, and this congregation and its community. I was being challenged to hear Christ’s call and not assume that this church and these pastors did not understand my gifts and talents. I decided to accept the request. Since that time, the difficulties I anticipated have indeed presented themselves, including developing creative ways of sharing a Bible story in English to non-English speakers and keeping the interest of 50 pre-school children. Yet, I have also come to see why I was asked.

After about a year, I asked a mother of a kindergartener, “Why do you bring your child to this kindergarten?” She responded first as I expected, with “It is a good program,” but then added, “Also, it is the only way that I can come to church.” Her husband is opposed to the Christian faith but not opposed to a Christian kindergarten because of the good reputation of the school. However, because of the programming offered at the kindergarten, she can join with other mothers in Bible study and worship.

It is difficult to “follow” when we want it both ways, to follow Jesus and to have it our way. In *Grace for the Moment*, Max Lucado wrote, “Miracles are events that stretch beyond our understanding and find their origin in God. But they are still mysteries.” Following Jesus is similar to a miracle in that way: following stretches our understanding and finds its origin in God, but following Jesus is still mysterious. Jesus turned to Peter and the disciples at a pivotal point and called the disciples then and the disciples now to task, “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” We cannot have it both ways.