

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Mark 8:27-9:1, “Steps to the Cross: The Secret”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/28/2021**

*Reincarnation* is the Hindu idea that when a thing dies,  
it is reborn and takes on the flesh of another thing...  
could be a rabbit...could be a person...could be a clam.

It's a fascinating idea which really emphasizes how connected all things are,  
and of course it has sparked the imaginations of many story tellers  
across many cultures.

I wonder how many of us are more familiar with *reincarnation*  
than we are the idea of *incarnation*?  
I wonder how often our imagination has been sparked  
to life by *incarnation*?

The Christian idea of incarnation is that God entered space and time  
in the person of Jesus, born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem.  
God became one of us, spoke human language  
and encountered human limitations.  
God did not simply say, “I am with you...trust me.”  
No, God the Father sent God the Son to live among us.  
That's incarnation.

Taking that one step further, incarnational ministry  
is the idea that the ministry of the church  
should parallel what Jesus did in the incarnation.  
The church should not just say, “God loves you ... trust us.”  
No, we should be among the people God loves,  
speak their language, and encounter their limitations  
alongside of them.

Not-incarnational ministry says,  
“Hey *non-churchy* people! Come and be like us!  
Sing our songs and come to our building!”  
While incarnational ministry says,  
“Hey *churchy* people! Let us go and be with our neighbors!”  
See the difference?

It's a good thing, and essential thing.

And in these days of the pandemic it might be something  
that makes more sense to the average person ...  
who would be in the pew but isn't in the pew  
because our building is closed.

What we really ought to pay attention to  
is *the way* that Jesus was in our midst.

Jesus embodied a particular *way* of living, leading, and acting.  
And that way is essential to the very character of God  
and the center of the gospel.

It is this missing piece, this way of Jesus,  
that our passage focuses on today.

Here's how I see it breaking down:

- Verses 27-33 reveal the *secret* of Jesus' incarnation.
- Verses 34-38 reveal the *secret* of incarnational ministry.

First, Jesus reveals this *secret*  
to his disciples when he asks them, "Who do people say I am?"

And after a few bad answers, Peter finally says, "You are the Messiah."  
And Jesus warns them not to tell anyone.

For now (but not later) Jesus doesn't want his identity as God's Chosen One  
to be known to the general public.

In verse 31, Mark explains why:

"[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man  
must suffer, be rejected, be killed,  
and after three days rise again."

The Son of Man must suffer. REPEAT

The title "Son of Man" does not conjure up in our imaginations  
the same thing that it would have conjured up for the disciples.  
For the disciples, the Son of Man is the figure  
we find in Daniel chapter 7.

In this very important chapter, Daniel has a vision of the future.  
And in his vision the Son of Man is a supremely victorious  
heavenly figure who overcomes his enemies.

The Son of Man is then led into the presence of the Ancient of Days  
and all nations and peoples of every language worship him,  
and his kingdom is everlasting one and will never be destroyed.  
That's the Son of Man.

So here comes Jesus telling the disciples, "The Son of Man must suffer."  
And not just suffer, but be rejected  
by all the ruling parties in Jerusalem, and he must be killed.  
And he would rise again after three days,  
but the disciples knew nothing of what that could mean.

This is the secret within the secret:  
Yes, Jesus is the Messiah who would rescue Israel,  
but no, the Messiah will not rescue in a glorious triumph,  
but rather through suffering.

But of course Peter can't handle any of this.  
That's not the kind of Messiah he declared Jesus to be!  
That's not what happens to the Son of Man!  
But Jesus will not play games with this issue,  
he turns away from Peter and looked  
at his disciples and said, "Get behind me Satan!"

The way of Jesus is the way of suffering and rejection. Why?  
Because the Kingdom of God operates on a completely different  
kind of economy than the kingdoms of this world.

So Jesus first reveals the *secret* of his incarnation.  
Next, he reveals the *secret* of incarnational ministry.

In verse 34 he brings the crowd into the conversation  
along with the disciples.

Jesus says **"Whoever wants to be my disciple  
must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."**

Jesus goes on to explain this basic teaching in 3 ways

- If you want to save your life, you will lose true life
- If you gain the world, you will lose soul
- If you seek honor on earth, you will be find shame in heaven

These are not the kind of lines that really work up the crowd.

These are not the illustrations that sent people home that day saying,  
“Wow, I can really apply that to my life.”

This is Jesus in fine form—he is not helpful practically,  
and he’s quite distressing in terms of the imagery he uses.

The first step in incarnational ministry is to deny yourself.

I think it’s safe to say that at the base of our economy,  
there is a lot of greed at work,  
and it’s at work at a level that each one of us  
interact with every day.

So I wonder...what if *Christians* in the United States  
had (all along) considered that the call of Jesus to deny themselves  
applied to their financial life?

Christians of the United States are complicit  
in the evils of our day for this simple reason:  
We want the good life, we do not want to rock the boat,  
and we do not want to deny ourselves.

And look, let me be the first to say, I really do want the good life.  
I really like being comfortable,  
I really like talking to people who are well educated,  
I really like high quality food,  
I really hope that my sons  
will get a college education,  
and I genuinely hope that I will have a nice  
retirement pension built up in 30 years.

But if these things come at the expense of my soul  
(or someone else's basic well-being),  
at the expense of my ability to connect with those who are hurting,  
at the expense of my ability to discern good from evil...  
then what good are they?

Jesus calls us to deny ourselves because that puts us in touch  
with the flesh of others in the world  
– it's the secret to incarnational ministry.

The second thing Jesus calls for is to “take up your cross and follow me.”  
Now the reference here is very clear to us in retrospect.  
Jesus is going to die on a cross,  
so he's calling those who follow him to also take up  
a figurative cross of their own.

Jesus is calling his disciples to follow him on a shameful death-march.  
And it wasn't all just figurative—  
history tells us that most of the disciples would end up  
being killed for their efforts of announcing the reign of Jesus.

To put it another way, consider this:

Jesus, in his incarnation, became like those who were  
oppressed by earthly powers and authorities.  
He announced that the Kingdom of God has come near,  
that the kingdoms of this earth will all crumble.

How can we, as his followers, announce and participate in the arrival  
of a heavenly Kingdom in the person of Jesus,  
if we benefit from the evils of earthly kingdoms?  
Jesus knows that we can't, so he calls us to deny ourselves,  
take up our *crosses* (when the inevitable push back arrives),  
and follow him.

That's the secret to incarnational ministry.

I want to practice, “incarnational ministry.”  
I want to be among those that God loves,  
to speak their language and to encounter  
their limitations alongside of them.

But when I see that the way of Jesus' incarnation was the way of the cross,  
the idea of incarnational ministry goes  
from "pretty hard" to "impossible" very quickly.

I have to say that when the snow was here and the Baptist Church  
was opening up their building to let people sleep there  
even with the pandemic raging, I thought,  
"Wow. That's incarnational ministry."

Not that we all have to do it the same way, but in that situation,  
the church was really taking on flesh among those who God loves.

And it goes beyond people living on the streets, too.

Our deacons do incarnational ministry with the people they connect with,  
and many of you do it without even recognizing that you're doing it,  
which is the most beautiful ministry form of all.

But this is why Jesus' had a community of a small group of people  
that he shared life with.  
Jesus shaped them to be like him from the inside out  
through the Holy Spirit that we see in the book of Acts.

It's impossible for me to take up my cross and to deny myself  
without being shaped from the inside out by the Holy Spirit  
through the fellowship of the church.

We are a community that is empowered by the Spirit of God  
to encourage one another,  
and to bear the shame of being associated  
with the Crucified One together.

We have to be connected to each other's real lives  
if any of this stuff Jesus says is going to make sense.  
We have to depend on the Spirit of the Living God  
if we're going to engage in incarnational ministry.

It's not just jargon, it's certainly not my idea.  
It's the way Jesus designed it.

Now you know the secret. What are you going to do with it?