

Bearing Crosses? (Mark 8:27-39)

When you were a kid, did you ever want something so badly you couldn't think about anything else? Did you ever dream about something so vividly you were sure that it had to be true?

You know what I'm talking about, right? Did you ever have that Ralphie-Parker-Red-Ryder-BB-gun yearning? Everything else takes a back seat to your obsession?

And if I phrase it as "an obsession," automatically, we get a little defensive, don't we?

"I have goals and desires, not obsessions. Obsessions are for people who fixate on things like 'Pizza-gate' and listen to InfoWars."

Fine, I'll back off of obsession. Did you ever pursue something so single-mindedly that nothing else mattered? You don't give your

family the time they deserve? Your job starts to seem like an inconvenient obstacle between you and your passion. When you're in the midst of your reverie, time slips away, and you can't be sure how long you've been checked out.

When I was in grad school, I was given my first computer. It came from a woman at the church where I was a youth minister. Her husband, who had been an engineer at Sperry, died unexpectedly—and his state-of-the-art computer was sitting in his old study collecting dust.

She knew I was getting ready to write my thesis and asked if I'd like to have it. Pffft! Of course, I'd like to have it!

The thing was premium hardware, running *MS-DOS* on a 20-megabyte hard drive. I was introduced to *Word Perfect*, a word-processing program back in the day. This was better than anything I could possibly imagine. You could just use the backspace key and erase stuff. You could take whole

paragraphs—heck, whole pages, and chapters—highlight them and move them around. They called it cutting and pasting—which was entirely up my alley because I grew up in an analog age—and I could cut and paste with the best of them—with, you know, actual scissors and paste.

Word processing was like having a personal genie available to magically produce your every wish. It had this thing—you could go through your whole paper, and it would check your spelling for you. I think the phrase the kids use these days is ***spellchecker***. And if you added a footnote in the middle of the manuscript, *Word Perfect* would renumber the rest of the footnotes accordingly—without having to type everything all over again.

I'd learned how to type, went through all of college, and the first half of my master's degree pounding away on a typewriter. So, the beautiful sorcery of word processing was like Disney Magic™. It immediately made everything I thought I knew about writing obsolete.

But it wasn't only word processing. What really sold me on the technology boom was that I could play Dungeons and Dragons—like, right on the computer. To a nerdy grad student, this epiphany was like discovering the cure for cancer. I played night and day ... literally, all night and all day. If it weren't for my wife doing an intervention, archaeologists might one day find my remains in Northeast Tennessee, wrapped around that Sperry monitor, with Pepsi bottles scattered around my shallow grave, sprinkled with Dorito dust and despair.

But Susan did intervene. She said, "You are addicted."

I said, "That's ridiculous. It's a game. I could quit any time I want."

She crossed her arms and stepped between me and the computer screen.

“Excuse me,” I said. “You’re in my way.”

Nothing. She didn’t even budge.

“Look, woman! Let me pass. Those Orcs aren’t going to kill themselves.”

Looking back on it, I was pretty pathetic. I wanted to play that game so badly that I quit eating meals, going outside, and talking to my wife. Even when I was away from the game, I’d be thinking about battle campaigns, what kind of spells I should cast, and how many hit points I’d have to sacrifice if I wanted to kill the dragon.

For one brief period, my reality was shaped by my desire to play that game. The rest of my existence was blinkered, overwhelmed by that longing.

I suspect it's that kind of longing that gets Peter in trouble in our Gospel today. The disciples have been following Jesus for a while now, and Jesus checks in with them, "You've been with me for some time now. You must have heard the word on the street. Who do people say that I am?"

The disciples jump in with some names they think might impress the boss, "John the Baptist. Elijah. One of the prophets."

To be compared with these folks is a compliment.

But Jesus gets a little more personal: "Who do **you** say that I am?"

Peter—the Hermione Grainger of the disciples—beats everybody to the punch, stabs his hand up in the air, and says, "You are the Messiah."

Through the years, as we've had occasion to mention several times, Christians have tended to view talk of the Messiah as some kind of spiritual designation—roughly the equivalent of the 2nd person of the Trinity—a divine figure going through the earthly motions for our benefit.

But in fact, in first-century Palestine, prior to the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 CE, we don't have any documentary evidence of a general expectation of "the Messiah." Now, that's not to say that there was no messianic hope, but the hope of a messiah had to do with what we called in fifth-grade Social Studies "current events."

The hope for a messiah was a political hope, a longing for a revolutionary who would be so fed up with Roman authority and their collaborationist bootlickers in the Temple that the people would flock to him in a popular rebellion. Like William Wallace or Robin Hood, the messiah would strike against the Roman occupation government. And that type of messiah would inspire

the peasants in the countryside to rise up to throw off the shackles of their Roman overlords.

When Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter answers, “You are the Messiah,” that’s the kind of Messiah Peter’s got in mind. At this point, the disciples are convinced they’re following Spartacus in a great uprising of the oppressed against their oppressors.

And it’s hard to blame the disciples. If you know anything about Palestine in Jesus’ time, you realize that the people Jesus comes from, the downtrodden he hangs out with, and the peasants who are attracted to him are all people who’ve drawn the short straw in life. Most are subsistence farmers, local artisans, fishermen, and day laborers. Almost all of these people struggled day after day just to stay one step ahead of “the Man.”

Because of the spiraling cycle of debt so many of Jesus’ neighbors found themselves in, they often had to choose whether or not to

send the children away to become day laborers—since, with their debt burden, they could no longer keep their families together. And all of this, the cycle of indebtedness, the destitution, and the breaking up of families and their family farms could be laid at the feet of the Romans, their client rulers (Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate), and the chief priests of the temple, all of whom levied unreasonable taxes on the small landowners and craftspeople.

So, the thought that the Palestinian version of Che Guevara was getting ready to start an insurgent campaign against the source of their pain must have been intoxicating to Peter and the disciples ... like, “can’t-think-of-anything-else” kind of longing.

You can imagine Peter clinging to the image of “Jesus-as-Malcolm-X” as he says with pride: “You are the Messiah.”

But then, Jesus blows up the whole dream, as “he 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" (8:31).

And you can see the horrified looks on the faces of the disciples as Jesus drops this little nugget of joy in their laps. "Wait, what? You're going to suffer and die? No, you see, that's not the way this works. The way **this** works is you keep building a following, bringing in the disaffected and the sorely used, and when the time's right, you give a rousing pre-battle speech, and we rise up and get rid of these Romans once and for all. Because if you don't have some kind of master plan to deal with the Romans breathing down our necks, we're all going to find ourselves circling the drain."

Peter says what everybody else is thinking: "No way. I would never let that happen to you. You're too important to the revolution to die before it even starts."

Jesus responds with exasperation: “No, no, no. That’s not how this goes down. Get behind me, Satan!”

But it’s what Jesus said **next** that must have given everybody heartburn:

If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me. For 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, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their own life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in glory.

You may wonder why Jesus’ disciples would have taken this spoiler so badly. After all, all Jesus **does** is tell his followers that

they're going to have to take up their cross. Why is that a big deal? We've all got our crosses to bear, don't we?

We've grown up hearing that. "Little Tiffany, she's such a pistol. Her mother and I have always said that she's our little cross to bear."

Wayward children. Problem spouses. Overbearing parents. Demanding bosses. Arthritis. The heartbreak of Psoriasis. Male-pattern baldness. All of these and more serious things that bring suffering are commonly referred to as "crosses to bear."

But that's not right, is it? Jesus isn't talking about the cross-as-symbol-of-just-any-garden-variety suffering. He's talking about the death-dealing power of the state to impose its will on anyone with enough courage or enough gullibility to question it.

Ched Meyers says, "The threat to punish by death is the bottom line of the power of the state; fear of this threat keeps the dominant order intact."

Meyers adds that "Jesus has revealed that his messiahship means political confrontation with, not rehabilitation of, the imperial state. Those who wish to 'come after him' will have to identify themselves with his subversive program."

In other words, according to Jesus, taking up our cross is a willingness to confront the systems of domination that hoard power while continuing to oppress the defenseless and the vulnerable—because crosses have always been reserved for those who pose a threat to the state. This willingness to say 'no' to the ruling powers, Jesus wants everybody to understand, is always fraught with the reality that the ruling authorities have a nasty habit of killing those they feel threatened by.

Our cross to bear is a cross—a concession that our willingness to speak up on behalf of those who’ve been oppressed, a concession that our willingness to fight for justice for the powerless, for whom justice is always a nice word used by the people in charge to give an excuse for why they’re the only ones fit to be in charge, a concession that our willingness to live like Jesus is a potentially deadly one.

Our cross to bear, like Jesus before us, isn’t just a question of suffering our own private indignities; it’s a question of who we’re willing to suffer indignities **for**.

In a world obsessed with its own private longings, following Jesus frees us from ourselves and redirects our longings, focusing them no longer on ourselves but on the people who need our passion most—the despised and rejected, the misused and forgotten, the voiceless and the vulnerable. In other words, the people who are always at the mercy of the powers who make crosses.

Our cross to bear is a holy obsession not with saving ourselves
but giving ourselves to save others.

And that's an obsession that actually seems worth it.

—Amen.