

Sunday, March 4, 2012 (Mark 8:31-38)

I can't fool myself into believing that I've gotten close to the kind of costly discipleship that Jesus is speaking of in Mark 8.

by [Phyllis Kersten](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue

In the gospel lesson for the second Sunday in Lent, Jesus is no longer in the wilderness. But he is being tempted nonetheless.

This time one of his own—his disciple Peter—is doing the tempting. Peter hears Jesus' teaching and responds: "No, Jesus. No suffering and death. What are you thinking of? You are the Messiah—the promised deliverer of God's people, Israel!" Jesus rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

A friend of mine suggested that I should have no trouble understanding where Peter is coming from in this text because I have the same need to "overcontrol" pretty much everything in life, even God.

So I began to think about what it is that I most often "set my mind on."

When I look back at myself in the parish where I served, I think I mostly set my mind on being successful and loved. (Peter is alive and well in me.) Then, after my retirement four years ago, I set my heart and mind on being the chaplain for the Chicago Cubs. God knows they need spiritual help—103 years without a World Series. I thought that serving as chaplain of these perpetual losers would be a perfect way to deny myself and "take up my cross."

Instead, I've served as an interim pastor: first at a city congregation on the north side of Chicago and then at a university chapel in Indiana. To a certain extent, being an interim pastor involves "denying oneself and taking up one's cross." If you are following a much beloved pastor, for example, you may experience rejection. Because you are only temporary—a substitute—you may be only tolerated as you

help the congregation prepare to receive a permanent pastor. It takes a little denying of one's self.

But I can't fool myself into believing that I've gotten close to the kind of costly discipleship that Jesus is speaking of in Mark 8.

In *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm fills in the contours of this cruciform-shaped life: "To *deny oneself* is to place Jesus' priorities, purposes, and path ahead of our own; to *take up the cross* is to be willing to suffer the consequences of faithful living; to *follow him* is to travel to unknown destinations that promise to be both dangerous and life-giving."

I catch the best glimpse of what it means to follow Jesus from other followers. I think, for example, of the courage of ordinary Danish Christians who saw their Jewish neighbors being rounded up and sent to concentration camps and responded by ferrying many of them by night to safety in Sweden. I think of U.S. citizens who go to the Holy Land to accompany Palestinian farmers to their olive fields during harvest or who put themselves in the path of Israeli bulldozers to help prevent house demolitions in East Jerusalem.

Closer to home, I learn about what it means to deny oneself and follow Jesus from ordinary Christians who are busy with out-of-town travel and family care but who nonetheless manage to attend to "the least of these" in my former congregation. There is Chris, the Stephen minister who became the court-appointed guardian for a developmentally disabled member named Monte. Along with other parish volunteers, Chris visits Monte regularly and watches over his care in the nursing home and through periodic hospitalizations.

Lauren helps support Mary, a former special-ed teacher who is in a care facility because of multiple sclerosis. When Mary was hospitalized and couldn't attend her mother's funeral, Lauren offered to go in Mary's stead and reported back to her on every detail of the service.

At the Lutheran campus where I was an interim chaplain, I saw students becoming addicted—not to obtaining the highest-paying jobs right out of college but to a lifetime of helping people change their circumstances for the better through spring break service projects in low-income communities in the U.S., Engineers without Borders projects in Tanzania and nursing students' service in medical clinics in Costa Rica. If these young people don't transform the world, they may transform older

folks like me to their vision of denying themselves for the sake of the world.

How does that desire "to travel to unknown destinations that promise to be both dangerous and life-giving" take root in people's hearts and minds?

As Peter learned, it doesn't come so much from knowing that Jesus is the Messiah as it does from knowing what kind of Messiah Jesus was—one who was willing to suffer and die and rise again, to restore to us both a life worth living and a life worth giving away, or "losing," for others.

It comes from learning that from the beginning of time God our Creator and Redeemer has been mindful of us mortals, setting God's own heart and mind on us (Ps. 8).