

The Natural
Sermon on Mark 8:27-38 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, September 17, 2006

With 75 wins and 74 losses, the Texas Rangers are eleven games behind division leaders, the Oakland A's. At this point in the season, not even Roy Hobbs could help the beleaguered Rangers. As many of you recall from the 1984 movie starring Robert Redford, Roy Hobbs was the middle-aged rookie sensation who led the fictional New York Knights to victory in a 1930s-era pennant race. Hobbs was a natural: from his boyhood days playing catch in sun-drenched wheat fields of the Midwest, Roy could field and pitch and hit with incredible grace and power. He was born to play baseball, and he played it beautifully, making arcing homeruns that literally knocked the lights out. Who can forget that penultimate scene? With the Knights down 2-0 with two outs and two men on base in the bottom of the ninth inning, the badly injured Hobbs comes to the plate. After falling behind in the count, he smacks a long ball, only to watch it fall outside the foul line. Finally, swinging with all his might, Hobbs sends the ball crashing into the stadium lights, creating a shower of sparks that illumines his path as he rounds the bases.

I admire people like Roy Hobbs, people for whom sports comes naturally. And it is not only sports at which some people are a natural. For some it is accounting, for others art. Some are natural singers or sailors, dancers or dentists. Whatever they do, these naturally gifted people make their work seem effortless. The reality, however, is that any work—whether baseball or biology, dancing or dentistry—takes discipline, training, and practice to master. Even people who are naturally gifted must go through the disciplines of exercise, training, and skill-building to refine their gifts and abilities.

The same is true for the work of Christian discipleship. When it comes to following Jesus, no one is a natural. The second-century church Father, Tertullian of Carthage, knew this

well, saying, “Christians are made Christians and not born so.”¹ That fundamental reality is something we easily lose sight of in predominantly Christian America. For much of our history, we have understood ourselves as a Christian people, our nation as a Christian nation. As Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas write, “Church, home, and state formed a national consortium that worked together to instill ‘Christian values.’” Consequently, it was believed that you became a Christian more or less naturally, “by simply breathing the air and drinking the water in the generous, hospitable environment of Christendom America.”²

That strategy worked, or at least it *seemed* to work, as long as prayers were said in school and before football games, as long as the Ten Commandments were posted in courthouses and nativity scenes placed on courthouse lawns. That strategy worked, or at least it seemed to work, as long as the church was busy “making America a better place in which to live, transforming society into something of which Jesus might approve.”³ In this vision and version of America, it was difficult to discern any difference between being a Christian and being a member of the Boy Scouts, the PTA, or the Kiwanis club. Being a Christian just came naturally.

And that is a very curious idea indeed. Curious because Jesus never says that being a Christian comes naturally. In fact, he says quite the opposite. One day while he was teaching, “He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’” (Mk. 8:34). Jesus gives every indication that following him is going to be unnatural, counterintuitive, painful, and potentially deadly work. But it is also the only way to real life—life with joy and peace and fulfillment.

¹ *The Apology of Tertullian for the Christians: Translated with Introduction, Analysis, and Appendix containing the Letters of Pliny and Trajan respecting the Christians*, ed. T. Herbert Bindley (London and Oxford: Parker and Co., 1890) online at http://www.tertullian.org/articles/bindley_apol/bindley_apol.htm. See also, *On the Testimony of the Soul*, ch. 1 at <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txv/tertullb.htm>.

² Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989) 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 40.

If you want this life, Jesus says, this life where you find what it means to be truly you, you have to lose it. And then, in good preaching style, Jesus preaches a three-point sermon. If you want to be my follower, Jesus says, first you must deny yourself. Already I don't like the sound of this. I don't like the sound of "deny yourself" because it flies in the face of everything I watch on TV, read in magazines, and hear on the radio. McDonald's once told me that I deserve a break today. Not to be outdone, Burger King promises that I can have it my way, right away. Citibank and Capital One say I can have it all for no introductory fees and low interest rates. Nike encourages me to "Just do it." And when I become overweight from too many burgers and fall into debt through overspending and suffer heartburn and anxiety, there is a plethora of pills I can take to relieve all that ails me. So I don't really need to deny myself, do I? Self-denial is so uncongenial to my lifestyle, so unrelenting, so un-American.

Sorry, Jesus says, but let me be clear: If you want to be my follower, the first thing you must do is deny yourself. St. Augustine is initially inclined to sympathize with us. He recognizes that the command to deny oneself appears "hard and painful."⁴ But neither he nor Caesarius of Arles lets us off the hook, because both church Fathers recognize that "What [Jesus] commands is not difficult, since he helps to effect what he commands."⁵ Jesus himself helps us to do what he asks. And the work of self-denial might be rather different than we think.

When anyone mentions "self-denial," many of us conjure images of surviving on bread and water (or at least the South Beach diet), wearing hair shirts (or at least off-brands), and mortifying the flesh (Total Fitness, anyone?). We connect self-denial with asceticism and brutal self-punishment. But the verbal phrase 'deny oneself' is perhaps better translated 'renounce' or

⁴ Augustine, *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 46:1, quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament II, Mark*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 106.

⁵ Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons* 159, quoted in *ACCS: NT II, Mark*, p. 106.

‘disown’ oneself.⁶ William Lane gives us a picture of what self-denial really involves. He says self-denial involves “shift[ing] the center of gravity in [our] lives from a concern for self to reckless abandon to the will of God.”⁷ Self-denial means putting our felt needs and desires in proper perspective and submitting our will to God’s will. Or, as Lane puts it, self-denial is “a sustained willingness to say ‘No’ to oneself in order to be able to say ‘Yes’ to God.”⁸

Second, Jesus says, if you want to become my follower, you must take up your cross. Friends, there is no getting around what this means. ‘Take up your cross’ means ‘embrace that which might kill you.’ It is as shocking and horrific an image for us as it was for Jesus’ original audience. Even in a culture that was not nearly as removed from the reality of death as ours is, death by crucifixion was for Jesus’ listeners a horrible, grisly means of execution reserved for the worst kinds of criminals. The command to take up your cross is an invitation to join Jesus in his death march to Calvary.

How can we understand what Jesus means, much less what good can possibly come, when he asks us to take up our cross? On its own terms, this demand seems totally inexplicable. Tom Wright encourages us to see this demand from God’s point of view, though admittedly it is very hard “not only to think but to live from God’s point of view in a world where such a thing is madness.”⁹ Here again we take encouragement from St. Augustine who said, “For whatever seems hard in what is enjoined, love makes easy.”¹⁰

The command to take up our cross is at least made easier in this: Jesus asks us to take up *our* cross, not *the* cross. What our cross will be is different for each one of us. I mentioned

⁶ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1991) 208.

⁷ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974) 307.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 112.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 46:1, quoted in *ACCS: NT II, Mark*, p. 106.

Tertullian earlier, and he explained that, “‘Your cross’ means your own anxieties and your sufferings in your own body.”¹¹ I also mentioned Caesarius of Arles who said that taking up the cross means bearing with whatever is troublesome. Ultimately, taking up the cross means being willing to share in the sufferings of Jesus himself. It is by taking up our cross that we become like Jesus, a people formed to be Christ-like, people “who grow in faith and understanding through participation in his sufferings.”¹²

Finally, says Jesus, if you want to become my follower, you must follow me. That seems obvious enough, if not an outright tautology. But there is something profoundly true here: Following Jesus means going where he goes and doing what he does. “Discipleship,” says Morna Hooker, “means following in the same path, and being ready to share in the same fate, as the one who leads: those who want to follow Jesus must follow him even when he is carrying a cross.”¹³ And Tom Wright reminds us that, “Jesus is not leading us on a pleasant afternoon hike, but on a walk into danger and risk.”¹⁴ The path we follow as we follow Jesus is the Paschal path, the way of suffering and death, the way of the cross.

Walking the way of suffering, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus do not come naturally. And so we must do exercises, train, practice following Jesus. We do this by coming to worship, reading our Bible regularly, praying often, doing works of mercy and love. Like Jesus, we offer ourselves to God and the world. The way of Jesus, the path of Christian discipleship, does not make much sense to a world that does not know Jesus. But we follow in that way, empowered by the grace of God, and we lose our life in the process, only to find that we are saved by the cross Jesus took up on our behalf.

¹¹ Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 12, quoted in *ACCS: NT II, Mark*, p.106.

¹² Lane, 306.

¹³ Hooker, 209.

¹⁴ Wright, 112.