

**Be Astonished II:
About Following the Way of the Cross
Mark 8.22-38**

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In his spiritual autobiography, called *A Traveler Toward the Dawn*, John Eagen described a moment in St Peter's cathedral in Rome when he was suddenly overcome with the presence and power of God in a way that would change the trajectory of his life for the rest of his days:

Suddenly, without warning . . . enormous desire for the living God flamed [up] in me. I felt as though my heart were being pulled out of my very body. I was overcome by a great longing for the loving God . . . to be at last a man of God, one whose whole life centered fully and finally on him.

It seemed so very clear to me at that moment that the old way of living had come to an end and a whole new way had been opened up for me. . . . I had a clear intuitive sense that this was a landmark moment in my life, a watershed event, that my future life would be dated from this moment, that all else in my life up to this point was just a prelude. (22)

That day opens up a poignant question: how does a person in a limited, imperfect, human life answer the call to total self-giving? (23)

Have you in your life ever asked a question like that, or come to a defining moment like that?

We're in a sermon series on Mark's gospel, exploring the things that Jesus said and did that were such a source of astonishment to those who watched him and listened to him.

The passage we're looking at today includes some of the most important things that Jesus ever said about what it means to follow him. And they bring us face to face with this question of what it means to live a life of total self-giving.

But, as we're going to discover, this passage doesn't just have one astonishing aspect to it. There are three different things that Jesus says and does in this passage that are baffling and bewildering to those who are witnesses. Each one could be an entire message. I just want to touch on the first two and then focus in on the third.

The first of those was

1. A "Failed" Healing

Or at least, that's what it appears to be. We read about it in Mark chapter 8, starting in verse 22.

Mark 8.22-26

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."

I was reading a book this week in which the author, trying to make sense of this passage, translates it, "The man said, 'I see people; they look like trees walking around.' So Jesus tried again." (Andrew Klavan)

Tried again? Sure seems that way. He failed the first time, gave it another go, and then got it right the second time.

But there are two problems with that interpretation.

First, has it ever struck you that, apart from this one time, Jesus healed *every single person* who came to him, without fail, regardless of the ailment? Listen to Matthew 4.23-24

He healed every kind of disease and illness. . . . Whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon possessed or epileptic or paralyzed—he healed them all.

Our son-in-law John Matthew is in medical residency. He's a brilliant guy but he runs into things all the time that are outside of his area of expertise, and he has to refer them to someone else. Not Jesus. There wasn't one time when, Jesus, through whom all things were created, said, "Wow, hmm. Okay, I'm really stumped here. Just not sure what to do with this one, but I could give it the old college try."

Every single one but this one? This is too startling of an exception to explain it as a failed healing. Clearly there's something about this double healing that's *intentional*.

That leads to the other problem with that interpretation: the context. When you look at what comes before and during this passage it doesn't take long to realize that this healing comes right in the middle of *everybody* – the crowds, the religious leaders, and even the disciples – trying to gain clarity of vision about who Jesus is.

Clearly he is powerful. Everyone can see that. But what's the source of his power? Is he evil or is he good? If he's good, that means he comes from God. So is he a prophet, or is he the promised Messiah? And if he is the Messiah, what sort of Messiah is he? What sort of king will he be?

Just six verses before this one, as they are worried about not having any bread right after the feeding of the 5000, Jesus says to his bewildered disciples:

Mark 8.17-18

Do you still not see or understand? . . . Do you have eyes but fail to see?

This is not a failed healing; this is a lived parable. Jesus uses this two-part healing intentionally to teach how God wants to bring us from a place of not understanding at all through a place of partial understanding into a place of complete clarity.

Those around him are beginning to see that he is the Messiah, the King, but they don't yet see clearly what that means.

You get a sense of the purpose of this double healing in the language Mark uses in the passage. In verse 25 it literally says: his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything "at a distance with radiant clarity."

What that suggests is that after the first touch he was near-sighted, or, as is sometimes said, *short-sighted*. He couldn't see the big picture. He could only see clearly what was right in front of him, as it related to himself. Just like the people who were trying to make sense of Jesus.

This isn't a failed healing at all. This is a very intentional, very successful two-part healing that is meant to press the religious leaders and the crowds and the disciples to think about their own vision of Jesus. How clear is it?

Two quick points of application here about the mysterious ways of God before we go on. We learn from this parable that

1) Sometimes God allows us to go through something primarily for the sake of someone else. Don't get me wrong. God isn't profligate. He redeems everything he ever does.

But think about it. This blind man went through the confusing experience of a partial healing – however long or short the in-between time may have been – so that the people around him could see more clearly. Sometimes what God is doing in your life is meant to be even more of a gift and encouragement to those God puts around you. I wonder if we might walk through those challenging in-between times in a different way if we were more aware that was the case.

2) In everything, whatever else God may be up to, God always wants to give us more of himself. And sometimes – maybe even often – the best way for us to experience his touch, the best way God can give us more of himself, is to withhold from us other gifts he could give. To give us, partial healing and himself.

I've been thinking about that with my own vision. Most of you know I've had cornea issues for much of the past year. I've had a couple of surgeries but things are still unresolved .

My cornea is great, my transplanted membrane is great, but because of damage that my swollen cornea caused to the skin on the outside of my eye, my vision in this eye has actually gotten a bit worse over the past month. I still see eight or ten overlapping images. God continues to keep me in a place of deep trust. I'm not anxious about the outcome, but it's tiring.

The blessing in all this is that this has been a way that God has drawn me even closer to himself. He has also used this to lead me to reflect on the nature of spiritual sight compared to physical sight, and to think about what is most important to me.

After my second surgery I wrote a poem called "Sight for Sore Eyes."

I can, I cannot, see.
20/12, 20/what – 509? 1003?
Crisp as glass in one eye, wax paper dull in Eye B.

Sighted but blind.
Isn't this always me?
Isn't this how I always see?
Ever looking but overlooking.
Seeing – but what?
Some crystal clarity and much dark obscurity.

What, in seeing, am I not seeing at all?
And what, in not seeing, am I now seeing more clearly?

Where I can see, thank you.
Where I cannot, help me, heal me.
Complete my sight.
Let me see you more clearly, and
seeing you, more clearly all things see.
I take you in but never fully see. Never see completely.
So touch these short-sighted eyes again. And again. And again.
Restore my sight completely, that my sight might be replete
with you.

"My Rabbi," the blind man said, "I want to see."

And if, in the meantime, you should choose to heal my physical eyes, so be it.

How's your vision? What are you still wrestling to see clearly? What might it look like to invite the presence and touch of Jesus?

That's the first astonishing part of this story – what seemed to be a failed healing.

Now we come to the second, even more astonishing, part of this story: what seems to be

2. A “Failed” Ministry

Mark 8.27-32

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

I've added in here the verse from Matthew that tells us what Peter actually said.

Matthew 16.22

“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

Mark 8.33

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

It says Jesus *rebuked* him. The same word is used for what Jesus does to Peter as for what Peter tried to do to Jesus.

“No, Peter, it's you that the demon needs to come out of! You're the one who is out of line with the ways and purposes of God.”

“You are trying to make sense of this from a human perspective. You are leaving God out of this and looking at it from the perspective what makes sense to you.

“You are seeing my coming death as the end of a failed ministry. You don’t realize this is exactly what God the Father purposed, that I would die on the cross. That is why I came.

“Just as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 anticipate, the Messiah will have to offer up his life as a sacrifice in order to secure the redemption of God’s people.

“You are completely blind to the fact that the only way my saving work can be completed is through my suffering and death.

“Yes, I am the Messiah, the promised king. All God’s promises are fulfilled in me (II Corinthians 1.20). But God promises not a physical kingdom or a political realm, but a spiritual domain that has to do with the human heart. And my death is necessary for me establish my kingdom and for me to conquer and redeem the human heart.”

How clearly do you see why Jesus came, and why he had to die?

Are you letting Jesus unfold his kingship in your life on his terms? Or are you insisting he do so on your terms? In a way that makes sense to you?

That leads to the third astonishing aspect of what Jesus said and did in this passage. For us, it might be the hardest and most astonishing of all. That is

3. His Confusing Call for Us to Follow Him on His Downward Path

Mark 8.34-38

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Wait, Jesus – you just got done saying “I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10.10)

And now listen to you! What are you saying? That we as your followers are called to follow you on your path to death? It’s one thing for *your* life to be cruciform. But it’s another thing for you to tell me that my life should be cross-shaped too.

That’s not just astonishing. That’s unbelievable, and even unacceptable.

I think it’s probably fair to say that these are among the most important words Jesus ever spoke about what it means to be his follower. And they are also some of the most difficult to understand.

I’m convinced the key to this entire section is understanding what Jesus meant when he said we must *deny ourselves*.

Mark 8.34

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Deny yourself doesn’t mean deny your value. Deny your worth. Deny your uniqueness. Deny the legitimacy of your needs as a human being.

One unfortunate translation has this saying:

You must decide that your own life is not important. (Easy English Version)

That’s just wrong.

Clearly, in the very next line, when Jesus is telling us how to “save our lives,” there is some self, some me, that we are meant to prize, to hold onto as of precious value, as a gift from God to be received and embraced and treasured. This isn’t a Buddhistic call to self-negation.

Remember that back in chapter 4, when Jesus first began to teach, he gave us the interpretive key to his teaching. He said these are the secrets *of the kingdom of God*. What he is saying will all become clear when we understand it from the perspective of Jesus as king and us as his faithful subjects giving our allegiance to him and living under his loving rule.

Well, if Jesus isn’t king, then somebody else is. And that somebody else, inevitably, is me. The starting point for all of us is God pushed off the throne and us sitting there in his place, ruling our lives as we see fit.

That willful, self-ruling part of us at the center of our lives that wants to sit on the throne and call the shots, that part of us is the part Jesus is addressing in this verse when he says we must deny the self.

Literally the word “deny” means “say no to.” If you want to be my follower, you must say no to the willful, wrongful, self-ruling part of yourself. Why? So you can say yes to me, the *rightful* ruler over your lives.

This is about the will. As Tennyson says in his prayer, “Our wills are ours, to *make* them *thine*.”

The New Testament understands the life of faith as having much to do with this central decision: whose will we consent to and whose we refuse. Jesus essentially says: You can say no to yourself and yes to me (Matthew 16.24) or no to me and yes to yourself (II Peter 2.1). Which will it be?

According to C. S. Lewis:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.”

In this passage Jesus puts that decision before us, and he invites us to say no to our willful self. Not diminish your being. Not negate your value as one created by God and bearing his image.

Rather: deny the part of you that constantly migrates toward independence and self-rule, the part of you that refuses to admit your creaturely limits, the part of you that wants life on your own terms. The part of you that wants to understand yourself without reference to the God who created you and rightfully rules over you.

Mark 8.34

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Say no to your willful self, Jesus says, and then: take up your cross. That doesn’t mean accept the burdens in life that you’ll have to face, your “cross to bear.”

The cross was an instrument of execution. The only person who carried a cross was a person who was on the way to his or her own death.

Jesus is saying: say no to the willful self-ruling part of you, and keep saying no to it, and keep saying no to it, and make saying no to it such a habit that it eventually begins to die in the power it has over you.

Deny yourself and take up your cross. Say no to yourself and keep saying no to yourself. And then: follow me. Give me your complete allegiance. Live a life of saying yes to me, your loving King – which is the life for which you were made. So no to you so you can say yes to me.

Mark 8.35

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Then Jesus says, “And here is the irony of it. If you keep saying yes to the self-ruling part of you, if you try to protect your autonomy and your self-rule and live your life for you, everything about that will feel wonderful right up until it doesn’t, and you get to the end and realize you’ve thrown your life away and you have nothing to show for it. You have failed to spend your life on its true purpose and you’ll never get it back.

“On the other hand, when you deny yourself, when you say no to your willful self in order to say yes to me as King, and when you live your life that way, here’s the twist: you give your life away, and in the end, and even before the end, you get it all back, and so much more. It’s the life for which you were made.

I still remember a conversation Sharon and I had with Jill, a young woman who lived with us for several months. We were sitting on the counters in our kitchen in Colorado Springs. She said something like, “I love what I see in you guys, and I’m really drawn to it, but I’m so afraid that if I become a Christian my whole life will be hollowed out and I’ll lose any sense of self and I’ll just become this unthinking Christian robot.”

I said, “Jill, I was so afraid to turn my life over to Jesus for exactly the same reason. And here’s the paradox. Now that I am his, I am more fully myself than I ever was when I lived my life for me. And my life is so much more meaningful and gratifying and rich with him in charge than it ever was when I was in charge of it.”

Mark 8.36-37

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Jesus stays with this choice. He presses his hearers to think carefully about what they will gain and what they will lose given the present path they’re on. Where is all this leading? How would you answer that question as you think about the shape of your own life, and who you say yes to, and who you say no to?

Then Jesus invites his followers to live in such a way that their whole life is an open declaration of their allegiance to him.

Mark 8.38

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

The world – by which the Bible means the people and the institutions around us that live as though God does not exist – has a constraining power on us. It conspires to conform us, to press us into its mold, to take on its values and its ways, to get in step and stay in step. Woe to us if we walk at cross currents to the world around us!

Jesus disagrees. This world in which we live, that seems so powerful and compelling, this world that we are so eager to please, and to find our place in, and to earn the respect of – there are so many places where this world that God created but has no place for God dishonors him. So how could we give it our allegiance?

I was up kayaking last summer on Lake Maxinkuckee and I noticed that almost every house had a flag flying that said something about the allegiances you could find inside that home: Culver, IU, Purdue, the American flag. What is the banner you fly over your life?

Do those God has placed around you in your life – your teammates, your classmates, your officemates, your neighbors, your family members – do they know that you have given your unqualified allegiance to Jesus?

* * *

Jesus puts a decision before us. You can say no to me and yes to yourself, or you can say no to yourself and yes to me. Obviously, like all decisions of faith, this is both a one-and-for-all decision and an every-single-day decision. Which will it be?

All this business about self-denial can sound so weighty and cold and harsh. It seems to be all about loss and denial.

But the thing this passage leaves out, that comes through again and again in other passages, is that self-denial is not the shutting down of a person but the opening up of a person, bringing them to life. That's because saying no to self in order to say yes to Jesus is a response of love to love.

Rightly understood, laying down the willfulness of the self in exchange for the will of the king is anything but a cold and burdensome exchange. It's a joyful expression of love.

In his book *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, Henry Scougal says that self-denial is just like what happens when someone falls in love. He says it is a "is a kind of self-dereliction, a wandering out of ourselves" that happens when someone else suddenly becomes important to us.

It is a kind of voluntary death, where the lover dies to himself and all his own interests, not thinking of them, nor caring for them anymore, and giving thought to nothing but how he may please and gratify the one he loves.

What an infinite pleasure it is to lose ourselves in him, and being swallowed up in the overcoming sense of his goodness, to offer ourselves to him as a living sacrifice

Never does a soul know what solid joy and substantial pleasure is until, being weary of itself, it renounces all claim to itself, gives itself up to the Author of its being, and finding itself having become a hallowed and devoted thing, . . . can say, from deep within: "My beloved is mine." What matters to him is all that matters to me, "and I am his". (62, 64, with modern paraphrases)

So we come back to the question with which we began: How does a person in a limited, imperfect, human life answer the call to total self-giving?

This morning Jesus invites us to make that choice, for the first time, or yet again, to say no to ourselves and our willful self-rule in order that we might say yes to him, to surrender ourselves to his loving rule, and in that act of giving ourselves away to find life, and love, and peace, and rest, and all else, in him.

We understand our offering each Sunday as the time to give more than just our resources to God but to give ourselves. As we come to the offering this morning, how will you respond to Jesus' invitation?