

Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

March 12, 2006

Sermon Text: Mark 8:31-38

I want to announce to you another thing, and that is, we have a brand new record set in two on two basketball that happened last weekend in our gym. Phillip Nickles and I played Dan Mullinix and my son, Dave, a marathon game of 101 to 98. Of course, I would not be announcing it unless I was on the winning team.

The point that fits into my sermon is this, out of the 101 points, I scored four, but we won by three, and so I won the game! Every little bit counts, and we have these charts all over our sanctuary with numbers on them. I know some people find numbers distasteful, but the numbers represent people, represent souls, represent souls bringing into and building up the Kingdom of God. Every little bit and every invitation counts.

A young woman, a college student, wrote a letter to her mother in which she expressed great admiration for her college chaplain. She said, “Mother, I never get tired of hearing his sermons. That man is such a wonderful preacher. Why, you would think that every word he says is true!” Now, you’re going to see in a minute that Peter did not hear every word Jesus said. If it conflicted with his desires, Peter ignored it. He fought against it. We do the same. People pay attention to all sorts of things about preachers besides their words. I have an example from my life.

Before I moved here, I had an old BMW, and when I first bought it, two churches ago, and bought it with 99,000 miles on it, I got an anonymous letter that I was shooting for Jim Baker televangelist status. In my last church, when I first moved into that community, one man, who was a surgeon, an educated man, was borderline coming to church or not. For the seven years I was there, he did not come to church, and he said it was because the preacher drove a BMW. People have ideas about how preachers ought to be, and apparently I disappointed some and angered others by driving the wrong sort of car. Well, Peter had some pretty ironclad ideas about Jesus, and Peter had it all scripted out. Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus, he thought, was the Messiah who had come to raise an earthly army and to call down legions of angels and fire from Heaven and kill and amaze and terrify and scatter all the filthy Roman oppressors who occupied their Holy Land. Isn’t it odd that whenever and wherever God reveals holiness, violence rears its head? Peter thought that Jesus was here to set up an earthly kingdom that would be bought with the blood of dead Romans built on the awesome power and might of God Himself. Jesus, Peter thought, would rule from an exalted throne, right here, right now, from Jerusalem, and would establish righteousness and justice, and there would probably be a slightly smaller throne, a little bit lower, just off to the side for Peter, who would handle the matters that Jesus didn’t have time for.

You see, history tells us of just that expectation for the Messiah, and we see from Scripture that Peter did have an expectation of a position of power at Jesus’ side. Imagine then, inside Peter’s head when Jesus started talking about going to Jerusalem to die! His beautiful, violent, simplistic, selfish dream was shattered! Impetuous as always,

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Peter yelled out, no that’s not what I signed on for, that’s not the ending that I left friends and family for. No!

That reminds me of another story. A little boy was promised a puppy for his sixth birthday, and after weeks of anticipation, he was taken to the pet shop to choose his puppy. He looked them over carefully, and he finally pointed to a plain looking shaggy little pup, which was wagging its tail furiously. He smiled, and he decided. He said, “Dad, I want that one.” Dad said, “Which one?” He pointed out the tail wagger, and he said, “I want the one with the happy ending.” Peter wanted the Messiah with the happy ending. He did not understand that one more prophet could not change the world, one more teacher from God could not change things ultimately, even a man from God with an earthly army and angels on call could never repair the gulf or the wall between God and His creation and between people and our neighbors. No teacher could eradicate sin, which is nothing but the war within each of us, between what we know is right, and what we actually do. Not even a great display of violence and judgment and smiting evil left and right would change the human heart and bridge the walls that keep us from God and from each other and from our true selves. Something else, something more radical had to be done, something else more horrible and unthinkable had to be done, and God had to do it.

The eternal God – filled with infinite love for each one of us – had to come in Jesus Christ and live a sinless life and confront the powers and the principalities of evil and corruption in government and in religion, confront evil itself, and take on the power of sin and death to pay our price. He had to die, an innocent man, because God’s justice demands that sin be punished and God’s love took upon itself that punishment for our sins – past, present and future. We know what Peter did not know, that Jesus was no military Messiah. He was God in our place. Jesus was the last full and sufficient sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. From 1 John 2:2, “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”

In a class that I taught as an adjunct professor once, I was reminded that propitiation means not just that a fine and a debt has been paid, but it has a deeper meaning, that a broken relationship has been restored. It doesn’t mean, “Your fine is paid. You may go now.” It means, “The wall is torn down. Come and hug me.” That’s what it means. Put on the family ring. Bring the robe, and kill the fatted calf, and celebrate. This child of mine, who was lost, is found, who was dead, yet lives! This son of mine has come home! This daughter of mine has come home into the arms of the waiting father! Isn’t that a lot better news than Peter was hoping for?

We’ve already seen enough of power against power and the blood that comes of it. It never ends. War is just one more evidence of the sin and separation from God and from each other. What God did creates a new reality, a new me and a new you and a new way of looking at others, and eventually, the Scripture promises, a new Heaven and a new earth. Jesus has paid our judgment and invited us into the celebration of new life where

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love is possible for other people. With the power of the Holy Spirit, love is possible even for enemies. It better be, because Jesus commanded it. In this renewed relationship through Christ, we know the God, who forgives and accepts us. We are able to have compassion instead of judgment on others who are sinners because we know they aren’t that different from us! We know what is right, but that is not what we do.

Jesus came for all this new kingdom not of this world, for new hearts and new minds and souls not sold out to the power and the wealth of this world, but sold out to God. Poor Peter doesn’t get his throne. He doesn’t get to judge and sentence the nasty Romans. Poor Peter! Jesus took his dream, and he stoned him by calling him Satan, and I bet that got his attention. Satan means adversary. It also means tempter. Jesus said, “Peter, get behind me.” It’s interesting, the Greek for that could be translated, “Peter, are you behind me on this? Will you back me up on this? Don’t tempt me to go another way. Get behind me.”

We all remember that Jesus began His ministry being tempted in the wilderness by Satan, tempted to avoid the cross, to do magic tricks and miracles instead. You see, Satan apparently had no more imagination than Peter. His temptations were to shortcut Jesus’ ministry, and not trust God. Take the easy way instead of the cross! We, too, are tempted to follow other paths. Our culture tempts us with the idea that you are what you make, you are what you wear, you are what you drive, you are whom you marry, who your friends are, your house, your education, your neighborhood, your hometown, your region, your skin color, your family name, your jewelry, even your haircut!

In this worship attendance crusade, we are also emphasizing, and I haven’t said it enough, bringing children to Sunday school. Over in the new building, we have a chart of children’s attendance in Sunday school. Parents, please bring them because it is important. Whether they want to come or not, please bring them.

Tony Compallo said, “You say you can’t tell a child what to do, you can’t tell a child what to be.” and he said, “Hogwash! Everybody else is telling your kid what to do. Everybody else is telling your kid what to be. Does the peer group tell the kid what to do and what to be? Does television tell your kid what to do and what to be? Everybody is telling your kid what to do and what to be – except you!” Bring them to Sunday school. We live in a culture that tells us what to do and what to be, and we are tempted and we are told by advertisers that we can become better and more worthwhile people by buying their products or wearing their clothes or moving into their neighborhood or making a name for ourselves by one possession or another. We are tempted to believe that we gain a name by the things the world offers. Don’t you see? This is precisely what Peter was tempting Jesus to do. Not the cross, Jesus, you can make a name, and you can gather a following, and you can run out the Romans and do so many things better for me, so many things better than die! Not death! That’s not what I want you to do. Jesus spoke harshly, and called Peter a tempter, a Satan, and told him where to go. Actually, He told him where to be. He said, “Get in line behind me.” It’s ever so much easier to follow when you are behind instead of out front telling your leader where to go. After all that, I think

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He looked at Peter with an expression that must have said something like, got it? Do you understand now? My kingdom is not of this world. This world is messed up, and God’s plan to set things right involves a cross – as unpleasant and contrary to your will as it might be – it involves a cross, and may involve a cross of sorts for you and for me. He said, “Trust me, Peter. Trust God, Peter.”

From the very beginning, trusting God is the point. In the garden, all things are yours, but trust me, leave that tree alone. To Abraham, I will give you a son, and then I will give you a sacrifice. With Isaac on the altar and with the knife drawn high, there seemed no way for God to keep both promises, but Abe trusted God, and God counted that trust as righteousness. When Noah’s neighbors mocked him for building a boat on dry land, Noah trusted God, and when all the prophets said, “Are you sure you want me to go to Niniva and tell them this,” God said, “Yes, go and say these things,” and eventually they trusted, they went and they did. The disciples dropped their fishing nets and families and followed Jesus because they trusted Him and they trusted God. Jesus was tempted to shortcut. Scripture says Jesus was tempted in every respect as we are and yet without sin so He was truly tempted, but He trusted God instead.

So to take up your cross means to trust God even when it costs you, to trust God and remember that the sin and evil of this world is so deep and so ingrained that when you radiate genuine love and genuine forgiveness and genuine compassion for others, you are going to face rejection, and you will be shunned and looked at funny, because people here in this fallen world don’t really believe that such things exist. Our sin rubbing up against each other has made us all so very, very cynical. True love and spiritual discipline and forgiveness in the pursuit of holiness are laughed at and mocked because this world is not what God intended. This world knows very little about love, does not trust Godly grace and compassion. For too many people, Christianity is the bad joke because in their life, in their life, they have never known real love, do not believe in real love, do not see real compassion, have never experienced complete forgiveness, and when a preacher or a priest or a church official falls away, it hurts so many more than just the victim and the victimizer. It hurts the cause of Christ because it adds to the cynicism of the world where there are already so many wounded souls, who almost come here, like Nicodemus, almost come and are sneaking around to Jesus at night and to see if maybe there is something real in Jesus’ name. No matter what the world wants, and no matter what the world expects or believes or disbelieves, trust God and trust the one whom God has sent, Jesus Christ. Don’t get out front.

My grandmother from East Tennessee used to say, “Don’t be too smart!” Any of y’all ever heard that? Don’t be too smart. You know what that means? It means don’t think too highly of your opinions and your ways especially when it comes to God. Get in line. It’s easier to follow from behind. Follow and trust. There may be good reasons for so many things that we cannot understand or see from this vantage point. God needs followers, not advisers. Don’t you think an offer of reconciliation and forgiveness for the sins of the whole world and the hope of new life here and eternal life beyond is a good enough plan? Don’t you think that’s a good enough plan? If it were up to us, I am afraid,

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that we, as Peter did, would want to pass judgment and bring death and wrath upon this group of enemies or that, or have power or comfort or riches for ourselves as Peter wanted to sit at Jesus’ right hand. Do you really need those things on top of forgiveness and new life and Heaven beyond? Isn’t that enough? All those things will rust or will become dust and decay.

You know, the snake in the garden in Genesis was traditionally thought to eat dirt. That’s the Jewish folklore. The snake was thought to actually eat dirt! Now, in that symbolism it meant that the snake was earthbound and tempted Adam and Eve to join it in an earthbound existence, living off the things of dirt and dust instead of trust and the eternal God.

C. S. Lewis said, “It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It’s appealing to feel I am the master of my fate, but that feeling is basically dishonest. I cannot go it alone. I have to get help from other people, and I cannot ultimately rely upon myself. I am dependent upon God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man; small, weak, and limited so living independent of God is self-delusion. When I am so conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of self, and that is the national religion of hell.” When it comes to God, when you come to God, your place, my place, our place is to follow. Now, my question as I close, what in God’s name are you doing? How in God’s name are you following? When in God’s name have you made an effort to fulfill the one marching order we have been given as a church, the one marching order, and that is to go and to make disciples? What are you waiting for? Consider this your invitation. Go and ask. Where is your eternal soul in your life plan? I pray your soul is sold out to God, who sends you out to others fulfilling Jesus’ ministry. That is what we are about. Ask others to come join us tonight at 6:00 p.m. for the special kick off service and each Sunday all the way through Easter. I’ll be preaching just the basics of the faith. I’ll be preaching the Christ who is not the one we would like Him to be.

One church ad campaign that I read about had a big banner that screamed, “Become a loser!” The ad went on to say, “We will help you lose your old life and build a new one.” At the bottom it said, “Get a life!” Get a life! What in God’s name are you doing to help others get real life? You follow Christ? Good. He told me to tell you, “Invite others to follow, too.” He told me that in His words. Amen.