

## Peace When Your Leader is Crazy

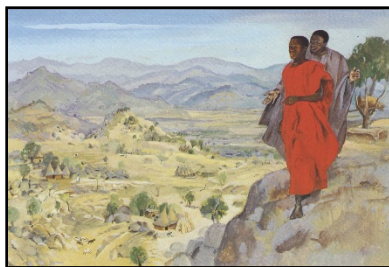
Rev. Dr. Michael S. Piazza

Sunday, September 16, 2018

James 3:1-12/Mark 8:27-38

Anxiety is epidemic in America, and a recent survey from the American Psychiatric Association revealed that 39 percent of us feel more anxious now than just one year ago.

Apparently, some members of our congregation were a bit anxious when they read this morning's sermon title, thinking it might be directed at our current president, but, if you listened carefully to the Gospel lesson, you understood that the disciples thought Jesus was a little crazy. Just as his ministry is taking off, he begins to talk about being killed. Peter rebuked him for such "stinking thinking," but Jesus turned and called Peter "Satan."



That seems a little harsh when you are talking to a friend, but you might recall that Jesus began his ministry by spending 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness wrestling with Satan about just how he would conduct his ministry. The temptation was to take the easier road, one that wouldn't lead to confronting the political and religious leaders of his day, which Jesus knew would ultimately result in his execution. The temptation was to take a less painful path to convince people they are unconditionally loved by God.

In the wilderness, Jesus wrestled with all of that and thought he had it settled in his soul. Now, here was Peter, his friend, giving voice to that very temptation to take the easier path.

In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus tells them that suffering and death is bound to be how this course ended, Peter says to him, "No Lord, that will never be." What Peter failed to realize is that the words "No" and "Lord" are mutually exclusive.

It is kind of like a dog that runs up to you barking while also wagging its tail; one end of it is lying.

The first confession or creed of the church was simply the phrase "Jesus is Lord." That was all the creed you needed because, if you meant it, you were saying that you would follow the way of Jesus even if it meant your death. For many early Christians, it did.

Today, everyone seems to think highly of Jesus, but most of us are more like Peter. When it sounds like there might be a cost involved, we are quick to say, "No thank you, Lord."

Let me ask you to think about a few questions that I hope will haunt you the rest of the day:

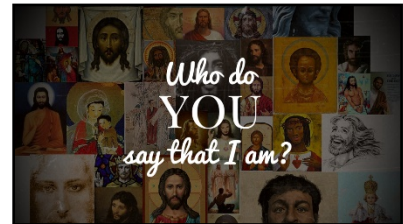
- When was the last time your faith really cost you something?
- When was the last time you did something you didn't really want to because you thought it was God's will?
- Perhaps most importantly, when was the last time you made a life decision based on Jesus' values rather than your own?



**That** is what we mean when we claim that Jesus is Lord. It means seeking to live our lives **His way** rather than our own. That is what it means to be a disciple, what is means to be a Christian.

Peter claimed that Jesus was Lord, until the going got tough, and then he revealed who really was Lord by telling Jesus, "No." Perhaps Peter thought Jesus was a little crazy, and maybe he was. After all, who lives with sacrificial compassion in a world in which everyone is out for themselves and their personal gain? Maybe following Jesus seriously requires all of us to be a little crazy.

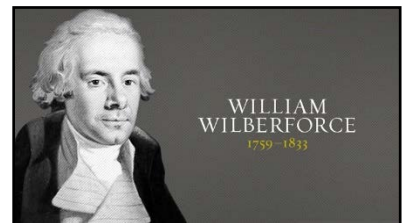
Jesus asked the disciples who people thought he was. The funny thing about this question is that Jesus never before acted like he cared what people thought of him. Maybe he asked only so he could look the disciples in the eye and ask who *they* thought he was and to determine if they knew what that really meant for how they lived their lives.



We could have an interesting theological conversation about who Jesus is, but, in the end, how we live tells the truth about what we really believe.

You must admit, seriously following the way of Jesus—the way of the cross, of loving enemies, of forgiving unconditionally, of caring most for those our culture considers *the least*—is a bit crazy, especially if you care what others think of you.

One of the most stirring examples of cross-bearing I know comes from the story of William Wilberforce. Few of us know his name, but we all see the result of his following Jesus and bearing his cross.



It all began in 1787 in London. The Industrial Revolution was in full gear, and children worked excruciating 18-hour days. A significant portion of the economy was generated by British ship captains who serviced the British plantations in the West Indies bearing their cargo-holds full of human beings captured in Africa and sold into slavery.

In those profit-driven days, few people gave a second thought to the tragedy of slavery. However, William Wilberforce felt the weight of his Christian convictions, and the young politician, only 29, introduced the first bill into Parliament proposing to abolish the slave trade.

His proposal was soundly defeated. So, Wilberforce began a relentless campaign with other Christian abolitionists. They distributed pamphlets, circulated petitions, wrote songs, and organized boycotts of slave-grown sugar, but public sentiment was not easily changed where profit was concerned. Wilberforce was mocked in the press, humiliated in Parliament, even challenged to a duel by one plantation owner who felt maligned by Wilberforce's campaign to change public opinion on slavery, yet Wilberforce carried on. Year after year, bills were proposed, and, year after year, those bills were defeated.

Finally, after 45 years of campaigning that broke his health, another abolition bill was introduced. Just before the vote was called, one member of Parliament rose and gave a stirring tribute to Wilberforce and his unwavering conviction to end this evil. When the vote was taken, the result was 16 nays and 283 yeas. The motion carried overwhelmingly, and, three days later, William Wilberforce died.



Sometimes, we must carry a cross a long way and for a long time if we are serious about following the Way of Jesus.



An African-American friend named John attended Bill's and my wedding in 1981. Attending a gay wedding was a very brave thing for him to do because he had just been elected to the Atlanta City Council just three days before. Bill and I had campaigned for him, though I met him when he came to do a training at the Atlanta Gay Center. It was in the early days of my activism, and I remember John talking about what to do if the police attacked you during a demonstration. I expected him to teach us how to protect ourselves, but what he said was, if we saw a fellow demonstrator being attacked, we were to shield them with our own body.

I shouldn't have been shocked by that because, though John was only 20 at the time, he was the one who led the march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama. As a result, John was beaten so badly that he was in a coma and was never again able to speak with the same articulation that led him to be the youngest speaker at the March on Washington at which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

People like Congressman John Lewis always make me ashamed of how timid my own discipleship has been, that I am so willing to call Jesus "Lord," but worry about what others might say about me if I live as if Jesus was the crazy leader of my life.



Taking up our cross is a theoretical calling for those of us for whom slow Internet is our greatest discomfort, but there are people like John Lewis, who has been arrested more than 40 times, who take Jesus much more seriously.

Although Peter was quick to say, “No, lord, that will never be” when Jesus began to talk about a cross, ultimately, according to tradition, Peter, too, was crucified on an inverted cross in Rome.



St. Peter's Basilica was built on what was believed to be that very spot because following the way of Jesus is a bit crazy, especially if you worry about what anyone other than him thinks of you.