

Discipleship: More Than Information

(The following is the third in a series of messages called Shark Church: What the Church Can Learn From Sharks.)

Mark 8:31-35

Just a mile or two south of here, in the Imperial War Museum you can find an Enigma machine. Enigma was the code used by the Germans in WWII, and the machine was how they sent and received top secret messages about troop movements, battle plans, and anything else an army might want to keep secret. The Allies had cracked the code early in the war—it was a joint effort between the Poles and the British, and later the Americans—they had the code early on, but they were pretty stingy about how they used, it.

Think about that. The war was raging, but Allied leaders had to decide when to use the code they'd cracked. The secrecy was mostly for one crucial strategic reason—you didn't want the Germans knowing that their code was broken, or they might find a new one. The Enigma story is one of the great subplots of WWII.

For us today, as we think about what it means to be disciples of Jesus, the Enigma story serves as a reminder of the difference between knowing...and living by what we know.

[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and 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.

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 things of God, but the things of men."

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."

So we're in a series called Shark Church. I've been making the case over these past few

Sundays that the church can learn a lot from the way sharks live.

A shark is an amazing natural machine. A shark is basically a muscle with teeth—it rarely gets tired or takes any rest. In fact, a shark spends its entire life doing three things:

It swims, it eats, and it makes baby sharks.

A shark that is true to its nature simply swims, eats, and reproduces. We've learned that a shark never stops growing during its entire life-cycle. That's an important part of what sharks can teach us.

Over the past three years, to start the year, we've talked about what it means to be the church. The church is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ, and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission.

If you're going to memorize one sentence over the next four Sundays, make it this one:

A faithful church is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ, and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission.

As we think about what that means, we're adding this image of the Shark Church—about churches that learn from the way sharks live. Because if we think about it, faithful churches are like sharks.

A church that is true to its nature—a church that is faithful to its calling—is like a shark.

It never stops moving. It seeks out nourishment. And it makes new disciples. A faithful church never stops growing during its lifetime—that's so important for us to wrestle with.

The Discovery Channel offers a Shark Week—seven days devoted to programs about shark behavior, shark bites—all shark all the time. We're offering a Shark Month—a look at what the church can learn from sharks.

Here's how we translate shark instinct into a road map for the church.

If a shark swims, eats and procreates, then as churches we're called to move forward

without ever thinking we've arrived at some kind of church perfection. We're called to nourish ourselves through prayer and study and service and reflection. And that we're called to go out and make new disciples—to share the message of the gospel in a way that draws people into community and into faith. That's the point of being a Shark Church.

Our passage today comes in the middle of Mark's gospel. Mark's story of Jesus is the one that moves quickly from story to story—he uses some variation of the word 'immediately' more than 40 times. There isn't even time for him to tell the birth story of Jesus in the beginning. His gospel starts when Jesus' ministry starts.

Where we pick up the story Jesus has just miraculously fed another crowd of people—4000 this time. He moves from there to the healing of a blind man in Bethsaida, and then to a critical story—really the turning point in Mark's gospel.

Jesus takes his disciples to a place called Caesarea Philippi, and starts a conversation with them. If you're familiar with the story of Jesus and his disciples, you know that Jesus is always trying to get them to understand who he is and why he came. Most of the time they get it wrong, and Jesus just shakes his head and tries again. But this time something different happens.

Jesus asks them who people say that he is. This isn't the way it sounds, exactly. Jesus isn't worried—it's not the way we might have done this when we were kids: 'Do you think the cool kids like me?' That's not the question.

Jesus is prompting his followers to ask themselves who they think Jesus is. When he finally puts the question to them, it's Peter who answers. He says: 'You are the Messiah.' Christ is simply Greek for Messiah, and so when Peter says this he's the first one to say that he believes Jesus is the one the Jews had been waiting for—that he was the Promised One, the savior, redeemer, King of Israel who would fulfill all of God's promises.

Jesus clearly liked Peter's answer. In Matthew's gospel, after Peter's response, Jesus says to him: 'Blessed are you—You're the rock upon which I will build my church.'

And then we get to our passage. Maybe this time, Jesus is thinking, maybe this time I can tell them what has to happen to me. If Peter can understand it, maybe the rest will, too.

And so Jesus starts to tell them that he has to suffer, that he will be arrested and tortured and rejected by his own people, and that he has to be killed.

Peter, the one who understands who Jesus is, takes him aside, the Scriptures tell us. He takes Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. I wonder what he said.

'C'mon, Jesus. We're just hitting our stride together—we've got a crowd of people who think we're pretty cool, you just told me you were going to build the church on me (thanks, by the way, for your confidence in my ability), and none of that can happen if you can't get a grip on your risk management. C'mon, Jesus—get with the program!'

Can you imagine? Let that sink in for a moment. Peter, the one who has grasped that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God himself—that in some mysterious way he is God himself—takes Jesus aside for a little life-coaching.

You know what's coming. Jesus yells at him and calls him Satan and sends him to the back of the class. And then he says this: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'

This is a key text for our understanding of discipleship—for our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

In the New Testament the word 'discipleship' is usually linked with the idea of 'following.' The word usually represents someone who has answered the call of Jesus, and whose whole life has been redirected in obedience. Whose whole life has been redirected in obedience.

We see some examples of that as Jesus calls his disciples. Think back on the stories where Jesus walks up to someone—they might be running a business or collecting taxes—a few of them were even fishing. Jesus simply comes to them, looks them in the eye and says: Follow me. And they go. They give up everything—they leave it all behind and go with this teacher wherever he leads.

What does that mean for us? How do we follow this Jesus?

How do we renew our commitment to being disciples of Jesus the Messiah?

It's so important for us to remember that the gospel of Jesus Christ is more than just information. It's more than simply knowing about Jesus.

The key is in recognizing the difference between knowing and living by what we know.

Remember that in our text this morning Jesus was talking to a group of people who knew him well. They'd traveled with him, shared meals with him, struggled with him, learned from him. Think about what that means: they knew his likes and dislikes, how he took his coffee, what he had for breakfast, which things aggravated him, which things helped him relax. The disciples knew a lot about Jesus.

Jesus valued that—we see how much he relies on the friendships he has among the disciples. Jesus values their knowledge, but he also tells them it's not enough.

That's why Jesus jumps all over Peter. When Peter decides that Jesus shouldn't suffer and die—that he should stay out in the countryside as a teacher, calls him the worst name he could imagine: 'Get behind me Satan!' he said. Why?

Because Peter thought it was enough just to know Jesus—to be in his presence and enjoy hanging out with him. Peter liked the status quo—he wanted to keep on enjoying things the way they were—he didn't want to have to do anything or change his routines or live differently.

The call from Jesus is quite different from that.

Jesus describes three ways we can move from knowing about him to living differently because of what we know.

First, 'Deny the self.' That's different from self-denial, like giving up cake or meat or anything else. Denying the self is more about seeking God's will and God's priorities over our own. This is much deeper than a diet. This is about applying what we know to the way we live. It's about growing in our understanding of the very heart and mind of God, and aligning our lives to his. Denying ourselves is not so much about what we give up as it is about what we take on as we live as Christ's disciples.

Second, 'Take up your cross.' This is a tough one—obviously it's not simply to carry a cross around, or complaining about something going wrong in your life. This isn't about the kind of fake martyrdom that makes people look for sympathy by saying: 'It's just my cross to bear.'

This is not only about suffering or the appearance of suffering. But it is about living differently because of Christ's sacrifice.

To take up the cross is to carry the meaning of Christ's gift of forgiveness into every area of our lives.

To take up the cross is to make Christ's redeeming work as visible in our lives as it would be if we were carrying his cross on our own backs.

To take up the cross is to live as an invitation to live the way it was meant to be. The life made possible by Christ's atoning work.

Finally, in the end what Jesus asks for is that we 'follow him'—that we follow in his footsteps—the action steps we see as we grow in our understanding of what Jesus said and did and lived.

Following is a tricky thing to ask for in a room full of leaders, don't you think? I mean, it can be a challenge for people who are used to things being a certain way to willingly try to change the way they live.

That's the challenge of discipleship.

Our faith in Jesus Christ hits the road, or sprouts teeth, or whatever image you want to use that means 'This is real now.'

Our faith comes alive when we start to live what we know and believe about who Jesus is—about what he did—about what his promises are—about what he calls us to do and to be.

Our faith comes alive—we grow as disciples of Jesus—when our lives become reflections of his life and ministry. When everything we do—when our whole lives are redirected in

obedience to Jesus.

We become disciples when we answer Christ's call to deny ourselves, to take up his cross daily, and to follow him. This is more than just information—this is a road map for life the way it was meant to be.

My prayer for all of us, individually and as a community of faith—my prayer for us is that we will live as Christ's disciples, hungry for knowledge and courageous in living out what we know.

Shark Month continues next week with a look at what it means to be a missional church. Stay tuned.