



BEER & SKITTLES

Mark 8:31-38



MARCH 1, 2015
PASTOR BRAD

Jesus had a PR problem. At least, that's what Peter thought.

Imagine, several years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples are sitting around reminiscing about the good old days, laughing, and teasing, like old friends do. One of them turns to Peter and says, "So - Satan, tell us about the day you thought you'd school Jesus!" And James chimes in, "Yeah, man, what were you thinking?"

And Peter begins to speak, "I just didn't like that whole suffering and dying thing. That's not what I signed up for; it's not who I thought the Messiah would be." The others got quiet. They remembered alright -- like it was yesterday. And they realized that Peter didn't say anything they hadn't been thinking.

Maybe Peter didn't say anything we haven't thought or wanted to say ourselves. Jesus had a different understanding of discipleship than most of us. When someone's vision begins to conflict with our own we take them aside to enlighten them, to show them the error of their ways. We rebuke them. That's all Peter did.

If we're honest haven't we done the same? Asking Jesus why he doesn't do what we want? Why he won't he see the world our way? It all seems so clear to us.

- If he can cast out demons and silence the crazy guy in the synagogue why won't he silence our voices?
- If he can heal Peter's mother in law why not my loved one?
- If he can make the lame walk why are so many crippled by fear, or dementia, or addiction?
- If he can calm the sea why won't he calm the storms of violence, war, poverty?
- If he can feed 5000 with a couple of fish why do 803M people – 11% of the world's population -- go to bed hungry?

Don't you wonder about these things? I do. People lose faith and leave the Church over those questions. That's how we rebuke Jesus. We want to enlighten him. He's not being or acting like we want. His words challenge -- even shock us; and just maybe, we're not so different from Peter.

Just a few verses earlier Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter immediately says, "You're the Christ, the Messiah." Jesus is the one the prophets foretold, the one Israel's been waiting for, who was supposed to restore God's people. Peter is right but he doesn't quite get it.

Peter has an Old Testament image of what the Messiah is supposed to do, and who he's supposed to be.

According to Judaism101.com, Jews pray daily for all of the elements of the coming messiah: the ingathering of the exiles; restoration of the religious courts; an end of wickedness and sin; rebuilding of Jerusalem; restoration of the line of King David. He's supposed to establish a government in Israel that will be the center of all world government, for Jews and gentiles, and He will rebuild the temple.

We all have our own concept of who Jesus is and what he's supposed to do. As long as Jesus is healing the sick, raising the dead, and feeding the multitudes, all is well. I like that Jesus. I'll follow that Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't conform to who we think he should be does he? Instead, he asks us to conform – to realize who he knows himself to be: the one who “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the priests, and the scribes; to die, and to rise again.” It's a choice we each have to make. Again and again the circumstances of life set that choice before us.

We can choose ourselves and deny Jesus, or we deny ourselves and choose Jesus. “If any want to become my followers,” he says, “let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” That's the surrendering that is the beginning of discipleship.

Now, I'm guessing that's not what Peter had in mind when Jesus said, “Follow me and fish for people.” I'm guessing that's not what we had in mind when we dressed for church today. How often do we really understand and practice our faith as a daily surrendering to God.

“Deny yourself and take up your cross.” Jesus' words are hard; his way can feel extreme. Surely God didn't bring his people out of Egypt only to say, “Ok, let it go.”

The Messiah is supposed to offer security and protection -- and put Israel back on top. Peter is learning that following Jesus isn't about reducing risks, or learning to control our lives. Instead, Jesus asks us to risk more, by surrendering our lives and our control to God. That is what Jesus does and he expects nothing less of us.

The self-denial of Jesus himself reminds us that our lives are not our own. They belong to God, and we are not in control, God is.

As long as we believe our lives are about us we will continue to try to exercise power over others, try to save ourselves, control our circumstances, and maybe even rebuke Jesus. Jesus rarely exercised power over others or tried to control circumstances. He simply made different choices.

Jesus chose to give in a world of takers, to love in a world of haters, and to heal in a world that injures. He offered mercy over vengeance, forgiveness over condemnation, and compassion over indifference. He trusted God's abundance in a world of scarcity. And with each choice he denied himself -- he surrendered to God.

At some point those kind of choices get noticed - offending those who live and profit by power and control. They don't deny themselves. But they do respond. It happens in every age to those who choose the path of self-denial. When it happened to Jesus he made one final choice.

"If any want to become my followers...." Who would sign up for that? Jesus had a Public Relations problem.

Suffering, self-denial, death — Peter realizes that this is NOT a scenario that will bring out the big crowds. He's thinking about the nicer bits of the story. The miracles, the healings, the water turned to wine, the blind seeing, the lame walking; sins are forgiven. That's how you attract a crowd.

Peter is pushing for a life with Jesus that's all Christmas and Easter, with a little bit of healing and a miraculous buffet. Peter's not a bad guy – he believes Jesus is the Son of God – the Messiah. And it's because he believes in Jesus that he wants a better message to share with the people. Peter believes passionately in Jesus, he has seen what he can do, he has heard his words of peace and love—and he wants others to see and hear him too.

In Peter's plan, it would really help if 1) Jesus didn't die, and 2) Jesus didn't say unpleasant things like, "Deny yourself and take up your cross."

One of my all-time favorite lines comes from a 1956 Warner Bros. cartoon with Daffy Duck as Sgt. Joe Monday and Porky Pig as his partner, Det. Schmoie Tuesday. It's a spoof of the old TV show, Dragnet.

Anyway, the two are walking along and Porky says to Daffy, "A cop's life isn't all just beer and skittles, you know!" Beer and skittles? I knew what beer was, but I knew that skittles weren't invented in 1956. I looked it up: they came over from Britain in 1979 as an import. Skittles is an ancient bowling game like 9-pins dating as far back as 3,000 BCE.

Despite Peter's best intentions, we can't just skip over the hard parts. You may have noticed, Porky is right: life's NOT all beer and skittles -- there's pain, and there's loss. There's sickness and death. Life is hard.

And Jesus knows that. He knows that in order to "dwell among us" he has to fully participate in the experience of humanity. He has to feel pain in order to feel compassion. He has to know heartache and betrayal. He has to die in order to beat death.

And it's not easy. It's not like he sails through life and right onto the cross as if it were the simplest thing ever. Jesus struggles. He is human and vulnerable and he begs God to spare him the death sentence, and three times he asks his friends to stay with him in the garden to help him get through the night. He never pretends that taking up the cross is easy.

I understand Peter's PR problem. He just wants to hear the good parts. Well, I'll bet we could pack this church if I only preached on warm fuzzy Jesus, who never challenges us, and promises us prosperity and an easy life. I'm no fan of war, oppression, starvation, pain, disease, or any of that stuff, but they happen – a lot. We can't deny them, and Jesus tells us to do all we can to alleviate the suffering of this world. He tells us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for widows and orphans, and lift up the oppressed.

And he tells us to take up the cross – our cross -- to take up, and to bear the troubles of the world. Because in taking up the cross and following Jesus, the pain of the world has no power. When we take up the cross of this world, we do so knowing that Jesus has already gone ahead of us and transformed that instrument of suffering and death into a promise of joy and abundant life. We can take up our cross because Jesus makes its pain somehow bearable.

Right now we're on the journey of Lent that leads to the joy and light and rebirth of Easter. (Dare I say it: the beer and skittles of Easter?) But this journey has to include the cross. There is no way around it. Easter is meaningless -- a 'Hallmark holiday' -- unless we experience it as the triumphant victory of life over death – of light over darkness. Our journey this Lenten season is about preparing to take up the cross of Christ. So, as we go out today let's try to focus not on human things, but on divine things. Life may not be all beer and skittles, but with the love of Christ it's not so bad...

A young man at the end of his rope groaned in distress as he prayed, "Lord, I can't go on. My cross is too heavy to bear."

"My son," the Lord replied with compassion, "if you can't bear its weight, come with me to the cross room. There you may exchange your cross for any other cross you choose."

Filled with relief, the young man sighed, "Thank you, Lord." Briskly entering the cross room, he mindlessly discarded his own cross and searched for one he'd rather carry. He saw many other crosses, some so large the tops weren't even visible. After winding in and out of the rows of crosses, he spotted a tiny cross leaning against the far wall. "Ooh – I'll take that one, Lord," he whispered.

God replied, "My child; that is the cross you brought in with you."