

Tracy Daub
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Mark 8:31-38

JESUS UNIVERSITY

Our son is a junior in high school which means that we have entered that stage of life when we are thinking about colleges and have begun making college visits. After a couple visits, the colleges begin to look the same and sound the same. Since every admissions office is going to try to highlight all that is wonderful about their school, the challenge as parents and prospective students is to find some way to peer beneath the sales pitch to learn about the real nature and culture of the school. Because, it really is a sales pitch that is made to parents and prospective students. Particularly in the Northeast where there are a sizeable number of colleges and universities all competing for what has become a declining number of high school students, colleges have their work cut out for them in attracting students. And so they try to sell us their dorms, and their athletic programs and facilities. They try to sell us their superb faculty and their great faculty to student ratio. They try to sell their study abroad programs and their student activities and their flexible meal plan. But really, really what they are trying to sell is success. Many of the schools are quite explicit in emphasizing their successful outcomes. They will share all kinds of statistics about the income level of their graduates and the great careers their students go on to have. They will promote the great graduate school programs their students get into. The schools will talk about what great connections their school will help students make with professionals in their field and the internships they can arrange for students so that they can have a leg up on everyone else. The message is clear: come to our school and you will be a great success. Success University is the place for you.

Of course, some of the schools will also talk about their concern for the whole person. Some will talk about their desire to develop thinking individuals. And some will also feature their emphasis on community service. But these are usually side dishes rather than the main course. Most of the time at most of these colleges, the main entree being served at these prospective student events is "success." Which of course, is understandable, right? All parents want their children to succeed in life. And so we sit there and listen to the sales pitch and contemplate how this place will ensure a successful outcome for our child.

Now you and I would have no trouble embracing the ideas of Success University for our children or ourselves except for one problem. As Christians, we have attended another university: Jesus University. And Jesus University teaches us a radically different set of values. Just listen to one of his early lessons that Jesus taught his students: "Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Humanity must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Does this sound to you like any kind of college success program? Personal suffering, rejection by people in power, death? But wait, there's more. "He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" This doesn't sound like any message we might get at a college or university today. Self-denial, hardship, losing our lives?

If suffering, rejection, denial, and death don't sound like strong selling points to you, well, you're not alone. Jesus' first students didn't like what they heard, and one of them, Peter, told him so. I wonder if we can imagine how shocking this teaching would have been to those

first disciples. They had personally witnessed Jesus' power. They had been present to see him perform miracles, to hear his compelling words. They knew Jesus was a man of God. Peter, only moments earlier, had declared Jesus to be the Messiah. And so they had pinned all their hopes on Jesus for a better future for themselves personally and for their community. Some of the disciples saw Jesus as their ticket to success and greatness. Remember, these are poor men--hard working, poor men. In Jesus they saw the possibilities for themselves. Being part of his inner circle would surely bring personal benefits. And then they all envisioned that Jesus would do great things for their people. The hardship of life under Roman rule, the cruelty of their rulers, the poverty and suffering they all endured, these would end now that the Messiah was here. Israel would be great again, full of power and prominence as in their former days of glory. No longer would they be subservient dogs to their Roman oppressors.

So the lesson plan Jesus offered to his students about suffering, rejection, and death contradicted the successful future the disciples had come to expect for Jesus and themselves. And it would have been especially shocking when Jesus spoke about his followers having to "take up their crosses" and follow him in the way down that dark path he just described. For us the cross is a symbol of a faith community. It decorates our sanctuaries. We wear it as jewelry. But for the people living in Jesus' day, the cross was a symbol of shame and terror. Crucifixion was the tool Rome used to intimidate its conquered subjects. Public crucifixions were carried out on any one who defied Rome as a means of terrorizing the people into submission. The victims died long, agonizing deaths. The bodies were often left to rot or be eaten by scavengers. Crucifixions were horrifying spectacles. So maybe we can begin to understand how appalled the disciples were to hear that instead of success, Jesus was suggesting a life journey toward denial, humiliation, and possibly death.

I want to be clear here about what Jesus was not teaching, because his words have sometimes been distorted to mean something they are not. Jesus was not advocating self-hatred. And Jesus was not advocating that people in abusive situations just put up with their suffering and oppression. That is not what he meant by denying oneself or picking up our crosses or losing our lives for the sake of the gospel. What he was advocating was a voluntary letting go of the idea of success we so readily embrace. Because, you see, we are *all* well educated in the school of success. It isn't just colleges and universities that are advancing the idea of success. The school of success surrounds us in our culture. We are schooled in the idea of success by advertisers, by the conventional wisdom of our culture, by the values of our friends and neighbors, by the kinds of people we see celebrated in our society. The concept of success is not just about the careers we have or how much money we make or whether we are accomplished and admired. Success pertains to all our efforts to prosper, to advance ourselves, to do well in life. That applies to all of us because we all spend a lot of life advancing our own interests and pursuing our own wellbeing. Millions of dollars are spent by people in our society to know a kind of worldly success: to have a nice home filled with things we like, to have a solid 401k, to take nice vacations, to be entertained, to feel safe and secure from crime, to be fit and healthy.

But Jesus taught us that we his followers are called to deny ourselves, to voluntarily let go of the self and our grasping for the idea of success that the world embraces.

But what exactly does Jesus mean when he talks about denying ourselves for the sake of the gospel? Surely he means something more than just giving up sweets for Lent. In this culture where Christians are not tortured, persecuted, imprisoned, or killed for our faith, what does Jesus mean that we are to take up our cross for the sake of the gospel?

Maybe it will help us figure this out if we return our focus to Jesus. What we see in the life of Jesus is someone who lived faithfully the kingdom of God. He lived out what we might call "kingdom practices" of generosity, service, forgiveness, acceptance, humility, justice, compassion. Right? These are kingdom practices. His faithfulness to these kingdom practices directly challenged the authorities of his day--both the religious authorities of his community and the political authorities of Rome. The suffering, the rejection, the death he would experience are because he refused to deviate from living out kingdom practices. That's what he was teaching his followers at Jesus University: kingdom practices of letting go of self-advancement, of living out generosity, of pursuing justice, of sacrificing for others. Following Jesus means following the kingdom practices even at risk to oneself.

Pastor Debie Thomas states that, "To take up a cross as Jesus did is to stand, always, in the hot white center of the world's pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then sidle away, but to dwell there. To identify ourselves wholly with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying. Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us, and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating that pain--no matter what it costs us."

Where is the white hot center of the world's pain? Maybe in Florida among the families whose children were shot and killed at school. Maybe in refugees who can't find a welcome anywhere. Maybe in unemployed factory workers laid off because their company moved overseas for cheaper labor. Maybe in America's prisons. Maybe in your local school that lacks decent computers and other resources. Where is Christ calling you to take up your cross, to enter the world's pain and suffering no matter what it costs. Kingdom practices are risky business. It is risky to enter the world's pain, and take on things like gun violence, immigration matters,

economic justice, mass incarceration, school inequalities. The way of the kingdom can bring a whole lot of headaches and maybe some enemies, and rarely, rarely much in the way of what the world considers success.

Jesus came to teach us another way of being in this world--a way that brings abundant life. But to know that way we have to, paradoxically, let go of what we think will bring us a meaningful life, to stop grasping at our idea of success, to deny ourselves and follow Jesus in the living out the kingdom.

The school of success is strong. It's pervasive. It's the endorsed curriculum of our society. So it is essential, that we not fail to teach our children and ourselves the kingdom practices--not as some kind of extra-curricular addition to the school of success, which is sometimes how we treat the way of Jesus--as some kind of nice supplement to the curriculum of success. Rather, the way of the kingdom is *the primary* course of our lives. Jesus instructs us that the way to success is not the way up but the way down in service, humility, and sacrifice. Let go, Jesus tells us, let go of all those things in life to which we grasp in order to feel important and meaningful and safe and comfortable. Let go and you will discover how high you can rise.