



**“If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me.” MARK 8:34**



People of the Passion

Suffering and distress always seem to bring out the best and the worst in our human nature. When crisis comes, some people are overcome with hopelessness, which can lead to despair; others are filled with courage, which can lead to heroism. Still others exhibit a wide range of responses that reveal their character: steadfastness, trust, generosity, weakness, greed, and fear.

One of the challenges posed by the season of Lent is how to be a disciple in the face of hardship and affliction. Jesus stated that the test of true discipleship is related to the cross: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). By undertaking the trials of this penitential season, we come to understand the meaning of the cross in our own lives and thus grow in the quality of our discipleship. We become more faithful disciples through caring for the needy, denying our selfish desires, facing our fears, letting go of control, grieving our losses, and forgiving mistakes.

Reflection and discussion

- Why is suffering the best test of discipleship?
- Are times of suffering also the best testing ground for friendship?
- Who do I know who is a model of faithfulness in times of crisis?

The passion accounts of the four gospels are not only about what Jesus did during the final hours of his earthly ministry as he took up the cross; the accounts are about discipleship and the challenges of following Jesus. Through the characters of the passion accounts, each evangelist intended to instruct his readers on discipleship. The people in the passion accounts are examples of the multitude of human responses in the face of suffering and distress. They are examples of the successes and struggles, the challenges and failures, of following Jesus along the way of the cross.

The people of the passion are the characters who participated in some dramatic way in the suffering and death of Jesus. Their stories are told in the four passion accounts of the gospels. Some of them appear in all of the accounts; others only in one gospel. Some of these characters have major roles in the final events of Jesus' life—like Peter and Judas Iscariot; others are mentioned in only one verse—like Simon of Cyrene and the centurion at the cross. Some we remember through their familiar names—like Caiaphas and Pilate. In contrast, some of the most admirable characters remain forever anonymous—like the woman who anointed Jesus and the daughters of Jerusalem.

Throughout each of the four gospels, the portrayal of the chosen disciples of Jesus is remarkably candid. The gospel writers seem to pay special attention to the weaknesses and failures of the disciples. Before the passion accounts, those chosen by Jesus to share in his mission are consistently slow to grasp his teaching; they do not understand his true identity; they protest his teachings about the cross; they are hesitant and fearful in the midst of the storm. But it is in Jerusalem that discipleship is most severely tested. The disciples self-righteously object to the woman who anoints Jesus. One of them goes to barter for Jesus' betrayal. At the Last Supper Jesus predicts treachery by Judas and desertion and denial by the rest of the disciples. During his agony in the garden, his closest disciples cannot stay awake during his most difficult hour. When the enemies of Jesus come for his arrest, his disciples are unprepared and they prove cowardly. One of them responds in direct contradiction to the teachings of Jesus and retaliates with the violence of a sword. All of them abandon Jesus and flee in panic. Peter continues to follow at a distance, but his fears soon overwhelm him as he vehemently denies his discipleship at the moment when Jesus is put on trial. As Jesus is crucified, those whom we would have expected to be near him at the cross have all fled in fear.

It is often the outsiders who seem to exemplify authentic discipleship in the gospels. The sinners and the outcasts are consistently shown to be more open to the message Jesus taught than the righteous. The tax collector, the prostitute, the blind man, the foreign woman, the poor widow: the "minor" characters of the gospels often have more to teach the reader than those with more prominent roles. They may not bear the specific designation of "disciple" or "apostle," they may not have even been graced by Christian tradition with a name, but these unexpected characters in the drama often exemplify genuine discipleship for gospel readers seeking understanding of how best to follow Jesus.

In the passion accounts these unexpected characters come to the fore. The woman at Bethany expresses her love for Jesus in a lavish way by anointing him with expensive oil. Simon of Cyrene carries the cross of Jesus. The women of Jerusalem lament his fate as he makes his way toward Golgotha. The women of Galilee who follow Jesus to Jerusalem remain with him after the male disciples have fled. The criminal condemned to die with Jesus asks for salvation. A Roman centurion recognizes and expresses the true identity of Jesus. Two hidden disciples, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, come out of the woodwork and give Jesus a proper burial.

Reflection and discussion

- Why would the gospel writers choose the minor characters to demonstrate genuine discipleship?

- What experience in my life helped me sort out my true friends from my fair-weather friends?

Teaching discipleship through the gospel characters

There is no single, clear definition of discipleship in the gospels. Our understanding of what characterizes a true disciple of Jesus must come from the many accounts that depict the relationship Jesus formed with his companions. Following Jesus, staying with him in time of trial, taking up the cross, and remaining at the cross—these are the gospel descriptions of authentic discipleship. It involves following Jesus on a road that leads to his death. Courage, perseverance, generosity, self-sacrifice, devotion—these are the demands that discipleship entails.

The evangelists wrote their gospels for the church of their own day, several decades after the life of Jesus and his disciples. These gospel writers portrayed the characters of the passion in such a way that their readers could relate their own lives to those who were with the historical Jesus. These readers were all faced with the challenge of continuing to follow Jesus in the midst of suffering, trial, and persecution. The fact that the chosen disciples of Jesus all failed in the most critical hour serves as both a warning of what can happen to a committed disciple under pressure and as a consolation that discipleship doesn't have to be perfect. Shaky faith, fair-weather discipleship, apathy and

lack of readiness for trial, abandonment, and betrayal of Jesus—Christians in every age reflect the mistakes of the gospel characters.

But the gospels do not leave us in a state of eternal regret and guilt for our failures. Following the passion is the resurrection, which is not only the victory of Jesus over death but his reconciliation of the disciples. The resurrection is the call to begin again. The risen Jesus renews the call of his failed disciples; Jesus forgives them and issues the call again to share in his mission. Those who abandoned Jesus become the nucleus of the new community. The sufferings of the passion have become the birth pangs of new life.

While the chosen disciples have all abandoned Jesus, at his cross stand a disparate group of people: a converted Roman centurion, a member of the Jewish council named Joseph of Arimathea, a group of faithful women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, the mother of Jesus who became the mother of his disciples. Here beneath the cross Jesus has gathered the first preview of what his church will be—women and men, Gentiles and Jews, sinners and saints. The community of the crucified Messiah is open to all—the sinners, the rejected, the poor, the foreigner, the marginal, the converted oppressor, the repentant, all those who search for God. It is not a church of elite and unerring saints, but a flesh and blood Church of frail and failing disciples.

The traditional African-American spiritual asks, “Where you there when they crucified my Lord?” Truly we were all there. In the failures and the heroism of these people of the passion is found the Christian life. This study of the passion is an invitation for us to get inside the heads and hearts of the gospel characters in order to better understand Christian discipleship. Were you there as friend or enemy of Jesus, a genuine or fair-weather disciple, courageous or cowardly, a follower from afar, a cautious onlooker? Through these gospel narratives we are invited to take our own place in the drama because we are indeed people of the passion.



Reflection and discussion

- What are the clearest indications of authentic discipleship today?

- What are the challenges I face this Lent in responding to the call to discipleship?

- What can I do to become a better companion of Jesus?

Prayer

Suffering Lord Jesus, you called your disciples to take up the cross and follow after you. As I study the people involved in the hours of your passion, teach me through their example how to follow you through successes and enthusiasm, as well as through testing and trial. Show me the meaning of the cross. Give me the grace to follow you more completely. Let me share the honor of being named among your disciples.