

ALTARED LIFE: What Matters Most

Mark 8:31-38

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/altared-life-what-matters-most/

I.

In September 1985, this congregation completed a major renovation of its sanctuary and facilities. Twenty months later, on Sunday, May 24, 1987, [it went up in flames](#) when a fire broke out above us during the Sunday evening service. At 7:25 pm that evening, workers from the nearby railroad station noticed smoke from the top of our roof and called 911. A police officer came inside the building and pulled the fire alarm. Everyone evacuated the building, and five minutes later, fire shattered the stained glass above the choir area.

Fire personnel battled the blaze from inside for 30 minutes before the order came to get out. When the ceilings started falling, hundreds of feet of hose and equipment had to be abandoned. About midnight, the steel beams in the administrative building buckled from the heat and collapsed, sending a fireball hundreds of feet into the air. The video and photos you are viewing today were compiled by our own Mike Downing, a labor of love for which we are grateful.

Leading up to the fire, the members, many still among us today, sacrificed to make the dream of a new, larger sanctuary possible. They sacrificed finances, giving over and above their regular offerings for years. They sacrificed comfort and convenience, meeting in the gym on folding chairs while the new building was constructed. 20 months later, they started all over again.

While I was not a church member until four years later, I've heard stories about this pivotal chapter in our 187-year history as a congregation. I've heard stories of shock, horror, and tears as people gathered outside in the street, watching a dream appear to go up in smoke. I've heard stories of people in and outside the congregation wondering if this was some divine punishment. I've heard stories from local people who, whenever I share where I pastor, respond with, isn't that the church that burned down?

But most of the stories I have heard have been about this congregation's resilience and God's goodness. Stories of how God kept everyone safe that night, from members to emergency personnel. Stories of how the Bible on the altar table was miraculously unharmed, the Bible still on display just down the hall from here. Stories of how members showed up the next day, Memorial Day, to see what could be salvaged among the wet ashes and ruins. Stories of meeting for worship, with praise and thanksgiving on hearts and lips, down the hill in the gym three days later. Stories of downtown businesses opening their doors for our Sunday School classes to meet each Sunday for nearly two years until this very sanctuary was rebuilt in 1987. Stories about how membership grew and fellowship deepened. Stories of how First Baptist Church rose from the ashes to experience some of her best days as the faithful people of God.

Long-time Pastor Nelson Duke gathered this church in the gym not long after the fire and prophesied, "When this is all over, we are going to be closer to the Lord and closer to each other." His vision and hope for FBC JC came true.

God didn't burn down this building, but God used this burnt-down building. God used it to bring God's church closer together. God used the flames of that fire to shine brightly as people witnessed a church's strength, resilience, and praise in the face of challenges. God used it to remind us of what matters most.

Sometimes, it takes things being burnt down for us to see what matters. Maybe it's the burning down of a building, home, career, or our health, reputation, or relationships. Perhaps it's the burning down of a dream, vision, or our expectations of something or someone.

II.

In today's Gospel text, Peter and the disciples look at their expectations of Jesus going up in flames. They've been following Jesus, saying yes to Jesus, with a particular set of hopes, expectations, and mistaken ideas about Jesus and his mission.

Just before our passage today, Jesus asked his disciples who people say he is and, more importantly, who the disciples say Jesus is. Peter answers, "You are the Messiah." While messianic expectations differed among first-century Jews, the idea that the Messiah would deliver the Jews from Roman oppression was widespread. No one expected a suffering and dying Messiah! We are so familiar with the message of Jesus' crucifixion that we cannot begin to understand how disturbing that announcement would have been for the disciples. Everything they had seen Jesus do and heard him say had no doubt given them big hopes for the future, their future ... until this moment.

When Jesus tells them the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be killed and rise again three days later, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes or scolds him. You can almost imagine Peter putting his arm around Jesus's shoulders, taking him aside as not to embarrass Jesus in front of the others, and saying, "Jesus, you've got it wrong. The Messiah doesn't suffer and die. The Messiah is a mighty ruler who will lead Israel to an earthly victory, ruling the nations with power and might. Jesus, we signed on for a crown, not a cross!"ⁱ

Peter was so committed to his agenda for Jesus that when Jesus's agenda differed from his, Peter told Jesus he was wrong.

III.

We'd never do that. Or would we? It is easy for us to criticize Peter, but how many of us come to Jesus committed more to our hopes and expectations than his? How many of us are guilty of trying to make Jesus fit our agenda over his own?

How many of us have pulled Jesus aside and said, "Jesus, you've got it wrong. This isn't the way it is supposed to be." When we said yes to Jesus, we thought it meant financial security, good

health, and a smooth, trouble-free life. We thought it meant a picture-perfect family, the dream job, and a victory over every battle – yet here we are fighting the same battles over and over, Lord. We thought we'd have the last word over those who broke theirs. We thought, like Peter, that our people would be ruling the nations with power and might. Lord, we want a crown, not a cross. We want victories, not suffering.

When Peter's focus shifted to his desires and plans, Jesus rebuked him to get him back on track. Jesus says to him, "Get behind me, Satan." Get behind me and follow me, Peter. Don't try to distract or dissuade me from my mission. Your mind is set on earthly things. Mine is not.

Then, turning to everyone else, Jesus tells them that his way of the cross may be their future, too. Those following him are asked to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. Jesus double-downs with even more unexpected news: To save your life, you must lose it.

This news was so opposite to the disciple's expectations and so difficult to comprehend that Jesus would have to repeat it twice more in Mark 9 and 10. Listening to Jesus predict his suffering and death must have been the worst days of the disciples' time with Jesus until his death on the cross. It must have felt like all their hopes of a conquering Messiah were being burnt to the ground.

Even though Jesus told them three times that he would suffer and die and rise again, I don't think any of them truly got it until they experienced Good Friday and Easter. Peter was still defending his agenda with a sword in the garden the night Jesus was arrested, refusing to surrender even though Jesus repeatedly told him his mission must go through the cross. That because of love, Jesus must suffer and die, taking all sin, including Peter's and ours, upon the cross with him in the most powerful demonstration of sacrificial love and forgiveness. There are some things you have to experience before you can understand them.

I think Jesus knew that, too, which is why he didn't give up on Peter. Just two verses after our gospel reading, it says this: *Six days later, Jesus took with him... Peter... and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them.*

A few days after Peter rebukes Jesus, and Jesus rebukes him back and calls him Satan, Jesus invites Peter, along with James and John, up to the mountain to witness his transfiguration. Jesus did not abandon Peter because he struggled with setting his mind on earthly things. Jesus kept Peter close, walking with him and teaching him what it means to deny yourself, take up your cross, and lose your life to save it.

And that gives me a lot of hope because, like Peter, I love Jesus and believe he is who he says he is, but I also love my ways, my agenda, and my comfort. I love the crown and having the last word. Sometimes, I don't want to deny, inconvenience, burden, or lose myself, not for others, not even for the gospel's sake. But I've had just enough moments when I did say no to Melissa and yes to Jesus, when I chose to give myself to love and service to others to know that losing

my life is the way to save it. Surrender is freedom. Taking up a cross is the way to create the world God dreams for all, the world we really want. It just isn't easy.

According to Mark, Jesus defines discipleship as a conflict between human values and God's values. Taking up our cross means choosing to embrace God's ways for God's glory and the good of the world, even when it costs us. It means living altered lives, daily setting down our agendas, egos, expectations, and lives as a sacrifice to God. It means keeping one's priorities in harmony with what Jesus told us what matters most — loving God and loving your neighbor.

IV.

For his weekly feature "On the Road," which airs Fridays on the "CBS Evening News, Steve Hartman brings viewers moving stories from the unique people he encounters and the special places he visits as he travels around the country. On Friday, [the story](#) was about a surprising act of compassion.

On January 20, 2020, a driver hit Rosie Minor's car in DeKalb County, Georgia. The impact forced the vehicle into a utility pole. The 75-year-old mom, grandma, and ordained minister died a few hours later at the hospital. Hours before her death, Rosie had called into the church's prayer line and offered these words, "God showers his grace upon us one after another. So, we have every reason in the world to be thankful every day." Those words would be her last recorded message alive.

Police charged the vehicle's driver, Nikia Cherry, with vehicular murder. She was traveling at 73 miles per hour in a 45 MPH zone.

Rosie's daughter, Staci Green, was consumed with anger, fell into depression, and lost her job. She was also consumed with seeing Nikia pay for killing her mother. Nikia pleaded guilty, received a \$2,500 fine, and was sentenced to 24 months of probation and 240 hours of community service.

But for Staci, the pain remained. She wondered how you could ever forgive the person who killed your mom, your best friend.

Three years after the sentencing, Staci faced Nikia in a courtroom to settle a civil lawsuit against the car insurance company. Toward the end of the trial, attorneys played that same recording from the prayer line recorded hours before Rosie's death. At that moment, Staci knew what needed to be done. In the hallway outside the courtroom, she approached Nikia and said, "I need you to know I forgive you."

The moment took Nikia by complete surprise. For years after the accident, Nikia had prayed Rosie's family would forgive her, even though she could not forgive herself.

Staci's compassion could have ended that day at the courthouse, but it didn't. Instead, Staci did something her mother would have done. After the accident, Nikia lost her home, job, and car. A

single mother of four, she was struggling. Staci helped the woman who killed her mother with money, transportation, and even temporary housing. They speak or text daily, and Staci has become a god-mom to Nikia and her kids. They now worship side-by-side at the same church. Nikia remarks, "The world needs more 'Staci's.' If a lot of people forgave, maybe this world would be a little different."ⁱⁱ

With the death of her mom, Staci felt like her world had burnt to the ground, but the Spirit of God raised new life from the ashes for both Staci and Nikia and their families, the life that can only be found through the power of Christ, through forgiveness, surrender, and sacrifice. Like Peter, Staci had to experience Christ's sacrificial love and forgiveness for her before she could ever offer it to Nikia. When she heard her mama say, "God showers his grace upon us one after another," it moved Staci to lay down her agenda and her pain for the sake of the gospel. And in dying to herself, she finally found life again.

In the clash between human values and God's values, which will we choose? The one that seeks vengeance or the one extravagant in forgiveness. In the clash between earthly kingdoms and Christ and his kingdom, which will we choose? The one that protects self at all costs or the one that pursues sacrifice at all costs for the glory of God and the good of the world. Which will we choose, First Baptist?

"When this is all over, we are going to be closer to the Lord and closer to each other." May the spirit of unity and closeness envisioned by Pastor Duke 39 years ago continue to be the flame that shines brightly from this congregation as Christ's sacrificial love transforms us into people of sacrificial love.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2, 71.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.atlantanevangelical.com/2023/12/20/mothers-last-words-inspire-surprise-act-compassion/>