

“God’s Recipe”  
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Mark 8:27-38

<sup>27</sup>Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”<sup>28</sup>And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup>He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup>Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man 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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Rev. Delmer Chilton writes that he once came across a story in an old *Reader's Digest* magazine while waiting at the doctor's office. The woman's story goes like this:

When my sister-in-law Ginny cooks, she likes to substitute ingredients for those in the recipe.

One time I gave her the recipe for a chicken-and-walnut dish that her husband, my brother, likes, and she served it one night when I was over.

In place of walnuts, she used raw peanuts. And for chicken, she substituted beef. In fact, every major ingredient had been replaced.

"This is terrible!" my brother said after one bite. Ginny glared across the table at me and said, "Don't blame me! It's your sister's recipe!"

In the Gospel reading today from Mark, Jesus spells out just what kind of Messiah He came to be. He would undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, rising three days later. Peter said, *OK, so that's the recipe, I like it, but let's just replace most of the ingredients. Let's take that "great suffering" ingredient and replace it with great joy. Then, let's take that "being rejected" ingredient and replace that with you being praised by everyone (with some praise left over for your faithful disciples, of course). Then, we'll take the "being killed" ingredient and replace that with you being placed on the throne of the king. We'll just throw out the "rising three days later" ingredient altogether, as that won't be necessary because you won't be killed!*

Peter wants to change the ingredients in the recipe for making the Messiah, but the recipe works. Swapping out all of the ingredients won't get the same result. But Peter doesn't like the ingredients, he thinks the formula is flawed, and so he takes Jesus aside. Can't you just imagine this scene? Jesus is telling the disciples the tough, but necessary, news of what it will mean for Him to be the Messiah, and Peter says, "Um, Jesus, can I speak with you, privately? OK, Jesus, there's a lot going on lately. You've been feeding multitudes, you've been healing people, we've been

traveling a lot. Maybe you need to go rest a bit because what you are saying is not making sense. I'm just telling you this as a friend." Actually, it wasn't like that. The text says that Peter "began to *rebuke* him." He pulls Jesus aside to scold him, as a parent would a child.

And we know what comes next. Jesus turns the tables on Peter, but *not* privately. Jesus speaks about Peter, but speaks so that all of the disciples can hear. He rebukes Peter strongly, even saying that it is Satan at work in Peter's words. And then Jesus says something very important: "you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." And that's true of all of us. We so often think about things only from the human point of view, not from God's point of view. That's understandable, though, because we can't *really* view things from God's point of view, I like how *The Message* paraphrase puts it: "You have no idea how God works." We don't. We don't know how God works. We don't understand how God chooses to do things. We don't know why some are healed and some are not, why some are born into wealth while others are born into poverty, why some struggle while others seem to have it easier. But even more so, we don't understand why God would choose to become incarnate in a baby and then have that baby grow into a man who taught us great things, but then was killed on a cross. Surely there had to be another plan, another recipe. There's a contemporary Christmas song that speaks in the voice of Joseph: "Now, I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say, but this is such a strange way to save the world." It *is* strange. But, though this song is new, its message is not. More than 500 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote these words: "<sup>8</sup>For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. <sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Truth be told, we would probably have been just like Peter, wanting to change the recipe to suit *us*, for God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are God's ways our ways. And so Jesus elaborated. First, He told them about what would happen to Him. Next, He told them about what

His followers must do. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Again we have a recipe, and, again, we are tempted to change the ingredients. We are often like those original disciples, wanting a political and royal Messiah, and for us to share in the glory. But, Jesus lays out a different recipe for those who would be His followers. As my friend Rev. Chris Joiner puts it, "Rather than glorifying themselves or their cause, to follow Jesus means to deny themselves. Rather than taking up the sword, they are to take up the cross. Rather than constantly striving to save their lives, they are to give themselves away freely."

Followers of Jesus are transformed into what is sometimes called a "cruciform life," a life that takes the shape of the cross. Bearing the cross throughout our days will shape us. We begin to live a life that is shaped like the cross, pointing upward toward God, and outward to our neighbor. Following Jesus will lead us into situations where others are hurting, so that we may share with them the love of God. Author and poet Khalil Gibran said "To be closer to God, be closer to people." That is the way it works, for we all are God's hands and feet on earth; we all represent Christ to each other, always pointing upward and outward.

And then, Jesus gave us these seemingly paradoxical words on life. "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 Jesus, losing His life was a literal matter, and for many followers of Christ, it has been so, as well. Some are called into situations where losing their life is all but certain and others give up their lives for the sake of the Gospel when it is least expected, but it does happen. Christians are martyred, even today. But all of us are called to give up our lives, to "lose our lives" for the sake of the gospel. Rev. Beth Quick has an interesting take on that. She writes, "I think of things we say we 'lose ourselves' in, like our work, our art, our passions, our music, our spouse, etc. Christ wants us to lose ourselves . . . in him!" We are not all called to die for the sake of Jesus Christ, but we are all called to lose ourselves in Him as He leads us. We are called to live for Christ.

Lent is a time of reflection and growth. We have this idea that becoming a Christian is an instantaneous matter. One moment, you are not a Christian, and the next moment, you are. It sounds like the old comedy routine by the Russian comedian Yakov Smirnoff that I remember from many years ago. When he first came to America, he was amazed by all of the products he saw on the grocery store shelves. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk. You just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice. You just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, 'What a country!'"

We often think of Christianity the same way – Powdered Christian, just add the water of baptism. But living into being a *follower of Christ* takes a lifetime. It takes living a cruciform life. It involves denying ourselves, taking up our crosses and following Jesus. During this time of Lent, we are invited to grow into our faith, to grow into being not just believers in Jesus, but followers of Jesus. We are called to remember our place as not getting out in front of Jesus, or calling Him aside to rebuke Him, but to get *behind* Him. There is no way to follow from the front or the side. In all that we say and do, we must be following the will of our God. We cannot be "backseat drivers," we must fully trust and follow the leading of our Lord and Savior.

So take this season of Lent to reflect on the recipe that God created, even though we can't understand it. Remember that God's ways are higher than our ways, and that our calling is to follow. Grow in faith and hope in this season, trusting in the leading of the one who came to save us all. Amen