

The Caboose

Matthew 16:21-28

Introduction

This week hundreds of children in our community returned to the classroom. Doing so is an annual ritual:

- One that is sometimes viewed sadly, especially when you are sending your baby off to school for the very first time.
- One that is sometimes view with great joy after a long extended summer.

This week children have begun to learn the important stuff: readin', 'ritin', and 'rthmatic. The question foremost on the minds of those students, at least for students in the younger grades, is... *What special job do I get to do today?*

The specific jobs will vary from teacher to teacher. As the student gets older the job titles will change as well. In our earliest years, there were days when we got to be:

- The Messenger
- The Lunch Assistant
- The Pencil Sharpener

Today classrooms have Computer Monitors or Technology Helpers. When I was in elementary school, we called that person the "Eraser Clapper." A great job that was!

But the job to which everyone aspired ... the job that was so exciting you couldn't sleep the night before it was your turn ... the job that always made your day perfect ... that job was "The Line Leader." Your day to be "Line Leader" was one day of the school year you did NOT want to be sick, and you did not want the mean kids in the classroom to be sick either. You relished the thought of telling them to get back in line. And you could do it, too, because on that day you were the Line Leader. And that is what Line Leaders do.

In today's text, the Apostle Peter thought he was the Line Leader.

It was a spring day somewhere around A.D. 30. Jesus and the disciples were in Caesarea Philippi. In the verses just before our gospel reading, a rare moment of brilliance had overtaken Peter. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter proclaimed that Jesus was not a prophet. He was not John the Baptist. No, Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God.

You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. (Matthew 16:16)

Jesus heaped praise on Peter following that proclamation – even giving him a new nickname: The Rock. Long before Dwayne Johnson ever drew his first breath, that name belonged to Peter.

Peter was feeling pretty good about himself after that. Wouldn't you? After all, Jesus not only blessed him in front of all the other disciples, he also said he was going to build the

church on the confession of faith that Peter had uttered. Rock stuff. But unfortunately for Peter, things did not continue on that trajectory. He slipped back into his old foot-in-the-mouth way of doing things.

So when Jesus started to talk about all the terrible things that would soon be happening to Him – things like suffering and dying – Peter the Rock became Peter the Line Leader. He objected.

“This shall never happen to you!” (Matthew 21:22)

Line Leaders get to say things like that. “You stay behind me, Jesus, and I will make sure nothing like that ever happens to you.”

What Peter didn't realize was that day in A.D. 30 wasn't his day to lead the line. In fact, as Peter would soon learn, it would never be his day. Because our life inside the Kingdom of God is not like our life in elementary school, a life where everyone gets a turn. No, on that day and every day, Jesus is the Line Leader. Jesus makes that point very clear.

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” (Matthew 16:23)

Jesus quickly restored order here. Peter was not going to determine the direction things would go. Peter was not the line leader. Peter had a different job. In classroom terminology, Peter was the “caboose.” That is the job every disciple of Jesus shares.

Every classroom job has specific responsibilities. The Caboose is no different. See what Jesus says?

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

As the caboose, Peter needed to do three tasks:

TASK #1: CABOOSES DENY THEMSELVES

See it in the text:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves ... (Matthew 16:24)

Peter encouraged Christ to **spare** himself. Jesus tells Peter – and everyone who wants to be one of His disciples – to **deny** himself.

The whole life of Jesus was about denying self. You might remember that beautiful passage of Scripture in Philippians 2 that describes Jesus like this:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

Those words are part of one of the earliest hymns of the church, something from around A.D. 50. They describe the heart of Jesus – a heart that took everything He had and put it aside to focus on the will of God the Father. He denied himself.

I always thought that my cousin Jodi was the closest thing to a saint when we were growing up, because one year during the season of Lent, when I and the rest of my cousins were attempting to deny ourselves vegetables, Jodi gave up chocolate. Instant halo time! Right?

Jesus is talking about more than that, more than a seven week avoidance of something to which you will eagerly return. He is talking about an attitude of the heart that will says:

In all things and at all times, my will and my desire come behind what God asks of me.

One of the great commentators in the history of the church writes this:

Self-denial is a hard lesson, but it is the fundamental law of admission into Christ's school, and the first and great lesson to be learned in this school... It is both the *strait* gate, and the *narrow* way. It is necessary in order for us to learn all the other good lessons that are taught there. We must deny ourselves absolutely. We must not admire our own shadow, nor gratify our own humor. We must not lean to our own understanding, nor seek our own things, nor be our own end. We must deny ourselves for our fellow Christians, and for their good; We must deny ourselves for Christ, and his will and glory, and the service of his interest in the world.

When the caboose is in his proper place, he notices that all the other parts of the train are ahead of him. Each one rightfully goes before the caboose. That's tough, but it is life giving. In the very next verse Jesus says:

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. (Matthew 16:25)

TASK #2: CABOOSES TAKE UP THEIR CROSSES

Let's return to verse 24 to see the next part of the job description:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross ... (Matthew 16:24)

A lot of people think this imagery of taking up the cross has to do with suffering and persecution. And it does, in a roundabout way. But more than anything, the cross is about identity. About who you are.

Whether you mean it or not, when you carry a cross the people around you are going to associate you with Jesus. The cross is and always will be the identifying symbol of the church and the people of the church.

Sometimes that identity will lead into places:

- Where you face suffering. That's very true. We used to associate with missionaries in foreign lands. There are many parts of our world where Christians are in great jeopardy. And there are many parts of our country where our faith is under great attack. That's the negative part.
- Where you find fellowship with other members of the Body of Christ. That's the positive part. It is the cross that draws us here. It is the cross that brings us into fellowship with other Christians in our community.

The challenge for every follower of Jesus is to gladly be identified by it, and not embarrassed by it.

In a couple of chapters Peter is going to face that challenge. This man who boldly made the rock-like profession will soon be questioned by a little servant girl. "Aren't you a follower of Jesus?" she will ask. The Rock will put down his cross quickly because that identification is troublesome for him. "I've never met him," will be Peter's response.

If you put down your cross, you get out of line. Everybody in the line of Jesus carries a cross. Caboosees may not lead the line, but they need to clearly be in the line.

TASK #3: CABOOSES FOLLOW JESUS

We return to verse 24 one last time:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

Following Jesus simply means this. We go where He goes.

Author Austin Mansfield describes it like this:

When I was being taught how to clear a minefield our instructor told us to step precisely in the footprint left by the person in front of us. The concept was simple: since the person in front of us stepped on a spot that didn't set off a landmine, the only spot guaranteed to be safe was the ground under that footprint. Stepping anywhere else meant risking death

The person at the front of the patrol is called the “point man.” His job is to make sure he clears any mines or booby traps before moving forward. Everyone else's job is to walk where he walks and step where he steps.

When we say you are following Jesus that means you are letting Jesus be the point man in our lives. You are trying to match your steps to His footprints.

APPLICATION

Allowing Jesus to be the Line Leader in your life can be a bit scary, especially if you like to have control over the outcomes!

Mark Batterson said in his book: “All In” –

“Many Christians think they are following Jesus, but I'm not so sure. They may think they are following Jesus, but the reality is this: they have invited Jesus to follow them.” Too many want Jesus to serve their purposes, to do their will.

But, I want you to join me in saying: “God, I want to follow you. Help me to get out of the way so you can lead.”

Today I suggest we phrase it like this:

God, I want to be the caboose, and I willingly allow You to be the Line Leader of my life.

Can you pray that? I hope so.

Amen.