

Sermon Title: **“If We Want to Follow Christ”**

Bible: **Mark 8:27-38**

When: on the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 15, 2024

Where: about 25 people (plus YouTube Live Streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. My Favorite Sport Players

What is your favorite sport? Do you play any sports? What sport do you like to watch? Football? Soccer? Basketball? Baseball? Volleyball? Tennis? Baseball is one of my favorite sports to watch! Have you heard of the Japanese Major League Baseball player Ichiro Suzuki? One of his popular stories was that he ate only one kind of food before the games like having curry only or cheese pizza only, in order to keep the same conditions each time, and in order to avoid any possible stomach ache. That’s because he wanted to put his all into the games each time without any issues. He knew how to eat other foods, but said no to the other foods to focus on the games. Not eating the other foods did not guarantee his team’s win, but he tried to do his best!

In a similar way, one of the best female volleyball players, Yeon-Koung Kim, eats cooked food only before the games. She tries to avoid any raw food before the games, because raw food sometimes causes stomach aches. I believe that volleyball is not as popular, compared to

other sports in America, too. But her passion for volleyball sounds the same as the MLB players. How about us? We are Christians. We are the disciples of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus Christ, do we say no to anything? Is there anything that we deny for our faith journey? Church is not as popular, compared with MLB, volleyball, and other sports. But are we serious about our church and our faith? Are we as passionate as our sports players?

2. The Messiah

In today's passage, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And Jesus asked again, "Who do you say that I am?" Who is Jesus to you? Many people might misunderstand who Jesus is. Maybe, like Peter, we might have the right answer for Jesus' title, and we might have the wrong understanding of his title, The Messiah, for Jesus. The messiah in Hebrew means "the anointed one," which can be understood as the king, the savior, or the deliverer. By the way, the Messiah in Hebrew is synonymous with Christ in Greek. Jesus is the given name and Christ is the title, like John the Baptist. John is the given name and the Baptist is the title.

For Peter and many Jews, the expectation was that Jesus would be the anointed one, the king, the savior or the deliverer, who would liberate the Jews and Israel from the Roman empire with military power and political authority. So, when Jesus taught about his suffering, death, and resurrection, Peter could not accept the suffering and death. The people were already suffering, at the risk of death, and dying. Suffering and death could not be meant for the king and the savior. How could the suffering and dying Savior deliver the people under

oppression? So, Peter dared to rebuke Jesus! That's because we humans see God as we want and as we desire.

But God's way is different from ours. The main ministry or goal of Jesus Christ is not to avoid, but to embrace suffering and death. God's liberation and victory is different from ours. It is not a military victory or political regain, but the resurrection, new life, new heaven and earth. Traditionally, suffering and death have been understood as a concept of scapegoating. God is both just and merciful. God's justice required the debt or the sin to be paid, and God's mercy sent Jesus Christ to pay that debt as a scapegoat. So, Jesus Christ had to undergo suffering and death to save us. In other words, suffering and death are necessary for the way of the Messiah, the anointed one, or the king. Peter's understanding of the Messiah was different from Jesus' understanding of the Messiah. "The Messiah" became a title of suffering and death, not a title of power and authority.

3. Alternative Understanding of Suffering and Death

But do you like the idea of a scapegoat that we traditionally interpret, understand, and accept? Does it make sense to you that God uses the violence of suffering and death to save those who are living under suffering or oppression or who are at risk of death? Winning with military power can be similar to winning with a scapegoat's suffering and death, because both use violence, even though they seem different, as each uses it in the opposite way. If God is almighty, is God able to save us without any scapegoat? What I mean is, does God need a scapegoat, in the form of Jesus Christ's sacrifice, to deliver us? Can't God deliver us with

love and grace without any scapegoat, without any violence?

Many modern theologians question the concept of a scapegoat, and try to understand differently the reasons for the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am still learning, but my current understanding of Jesus' suffering and death is that God wants to be with us in our suffering and death. God wants to be our friend, our sister, our brother, and ourselves who are suffering in this broken and messy world. When I see the cross, I see my brother Jesus who suffers with me, myself who struggles and is lost, rather than the savior. The Apostle Paul confessed in Galatians 2:19-20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

I believe that God could save us even from God's location far away from us in heaven, but what God did was that God became a human being—Jesus Christ lived on the earth, endured suffering and even death, in order to be with us. God decided to be vulnerable just like us. God suffers with us, sometimes instead of us, to be present in our real lives. That way, God, the Divine One, shows us comfort, hope, life, and the light to our own lives. In this sense, suffering and death is neither sacrifice nor violence, but love, grace, and mercy. And God's love and grace is with us and in us.

4. If We Want to Follow Christ

Following Jesus is not easy. That's because it means to deny ourselves and to take up our cross. We might misunderstand who our Lord Jesus Christ is. We might misunderstand Jesus'

ministry, his cross and death, and the resurrection. We might want to hold our own human understanding, not divine understanding. We might already feel that we are denied by others or by our broken systems of oppression or violence. We might feel that we already have a lot of crosses to bear in our lives. But please remember that God loves you, since God created you. Please remember that God loves you enough to come from heaven to live your kind of life on earth. God loves you enough to be with you in your suffering. God's not ashamed of your misunderstandings, your mistakes, your failures, your suffering and struggles. God decided to love you even to give Godself to you in order to live with you. When you follow Jesus, or even before you follow Jesus, God's love remains steadfast. God's love and grace is with you and in you already, still, and all the time. So, when God calls you, how about deciding to follow Jesus? It is not easy, but God will be with you all the time with love and grace.

Closing Prayer

Loving and living God, thank you so much for your love and grace. Thank you so much for being with us in our misunderstandings and our struggles. Thank you so much for your holy presence in our sadness and suffering. And we want to follow you, Lord. Please guide us and lead us to follow you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.