

“Losing Your Life, Bearing Your Cross” a Lenten sermon
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TEXT: Mark 8:31-38 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.’ 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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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.’

EARLIER THIS WEEK, I complained to a friend of mine that I really don’t like today’s Gospel reading. I find it hard to understand, hard to accept, hard to preach! He replied, rather benignly, “O really? I think that this is one gospel that closely, if not most closely, intersects with my own Buddhist understandings.” He left me wondering.

The Buddhist philosophy is a process of dying to one’s self. That is, only in letting go of attachments to the world, dying to gratification of ego, can the true self move toward enlightenment, toward a one-ness with the universe. Buddha says, since suffering is caused by a desperate attempt to preserve our ideas of life, our things, our pride, our happiness; suffering ends when craving ends, when one dies to ego and is thus freed from desire.

Dying to one’s self. Hmmm. Is that what Jesus was saying? Well, as always, when in doubt, return to the source! Let’s look at the passage itself.

We find ourselves at a turning point in Mark’s gospel. Up until now, emphasis has been on the authority and the power of Jesus. There have been healings and exorcisms and feedings and the proclamation of the reign of God. Now the story turns toward Jerusalem; it moves to the rejection and death of Jesus. Another way to say it is, we move from the Messiah-ship of Jesus, to the meaning of that Messiah-ship.

At this point, the theme of discipleship swells to a crescendo. Because his teachings, his claims, ran counter to those of the religious and civil authorities, Jesus had always known that his was a collision course with those in power. He had always known that suffering and death were likely outcomes. Now he begins to speak about it. Not only that, he begins to ask others to follow him into it.

Peter doesn't like the change. He probably speaks for all of us when he objects. Peter was ready for the glory of following the Messiah, but not the sacrifice. Peter tries to behave like a patron, a protector. But Jesus would not be patronized and could not be protected., so Peter is rebuked. Was it a sharp retort, a verbal slap? Or was it a more amused and cajoling “Come on Pete, you know better, get behind me Satan. Don’t tempt me. Just follow me.” There is no easy way out. Jesus will not go around his wilderness. Nor will he turn away from it. He marches straight forward into it, and through it, faithful to his God.

And that’s where we come in. He calls us to do likewise. This text has moved from “Who is Jesus?” to “What does being Christian mean?” And now it moves to “What does being a disciple mean?” The invitation to follow, first extended beside a sunny sea, is now redefined in the shadow of a cross.

Mark is a lion, strong and tough. He brushes away pieties and goes for the jugular of life itself: deny self, lose your life, take up the cross, follow me—these are a single call, a single strenuous commitment. It is as though Jesus is saying to Peter (and thus to all of us) “Your trouble is the misuse of your own power. It is the ego which shuts out the spirit. Stubbornness is alienation. The way to fulfillment is self denial.” Perhaps we are into Buddhism after all!

“We are not our own” said John Calvin. “Therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations or actions. We are God’s.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die... Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.” Our own Book of Order (G-3.0400) says "The Church is called to undertake [its] mission even at the risk of losing its life...."

A disciple, then, is a student who follows Jesus, a follower who learns from him. Discipleship means cutting across the grain of conventional wisdom, popular piety, and even natural inclination. It means there may be something more important than our personal agendas.

Back in 1969, after the Watts riots and the Washington DC riots, in the heat of the Vietnam War and civil rights marches, I was in a church gymnasium, part of a group of activists against everything and for everything at the same time. We were Head Start volunteers and Earth Day visionaries and peace marchers and political advocates. I was sitting on the floor with about a hundred others, watching intently as a large black man, with a large afro, wearing a colorful dashiki, paced back and forth in front of us, glaring at us, like a caged lion. He was a leader in the Black community and it was quite clear that we would sit there until he decided what would happen next. He continued to say nothing. Pacing back and forth, back and forth. It seemed like an eternity. Finally he spoke. "The problem with you white folk, the problem with you middle-class, wet behind the ears, white folk, is that you haven't got a clue what you are willing to die for. And because you don 't know what you are willing to die for, you haven't got a clue why you are alive!"

Jesus says, "Why are you alive?"

Picking up your cross is not the burden that life puts upon us. It is the positive choice we make, to do something of value, to let go of one's own self interest and move into rigorous honesty about your self and your life choices. The emphasis is not on the cross it is on the bearing. It is not the economic downturn that is our "cross" it is the determination to adjust our values and our choices. The president's budget and stimulus alone will not bring Easter morning to the country; a lot more than government needs to change in the midst of this crisis. Bearing the cross, in a Christian context, means that voluntary business practices, the function of our local churches, and our personal habits all must change as well. It is back to basics, returning with a sort of nobility and integrity to helping one another. A colleague remarked to me, "We have been accustomed to buying our communal responsibilities." He meant that by creating and supporting the number of nonprofit helping agencies we have, we have abdicated our own personal involvement. Bearing the cross of economic recovery means rethinking our needs and our values, making some tough choices on behalf of the whole society.

The same friend who embraces Buddhism lost his baby son to illness some years ago. He suffered a great deal; he endured enormous pain; he took years to heal. But he now tells me, "I live in freedom because nothing worse can happen to me. I have died and I live again, and my life is easier. I am not holding on; I really seek to follow the Spirit, to hear God's will." He is one of the wisest, most available, most serene people I know. He listens and he gives and he is without agenda. It was not the death of his child that was his cross to bear. It was his willingness to pick up his life and go forth, in prayer and in praise.

Not all who have understood this are giants and martyrs. How many of you left behind youthful dreams and aspirations to raise children or care for an aging parent or a mentally ill spouse? Do you know anyone whose civil disobedience on behalf of others landed them in jail? Some of you push through physical or emotional pain every single day; your cross is not the pain but the will to move from isolation and complaint, to human community. Who among you has lost a golden opportunity because you would not lie or cheat? If more financial executives and managers had done that, our country would not be in this current economic crisis!

Losing your life means choosing to follow rather than live in ego isolation or arrogant superiority. It is leaving behind personality and pursuing principle. With Jesus, trusting Jesus, it is finally okay to stop trying to be right all the time, stop trying to control your own destiny so rigidly. It is time to let go of your own agenda and trust in something bigger. Jesus does not ask for self hatred, nor for rash behaviors, but for abandoning a self-centered determination to be always in charge. Losing your life, picking up your cross, is the intentional, deliberate choice of hope over despair, of action over fear, of forgiveness over resentments.

I think of Linda, a Palestinian woman who works in a crafts co-op in Bethlehem. She welcomed us into a big empty shop with the words "I say to you a special Aramaic word

which means I welcome you and you are part of my family.” After our shopping she invited us next door to try some of her freshly made spinach triangles. She talked about a life lived in fear, a life of struggle, with physical as well as financial troubles. Her son lives in the United States, and when we asked why she didn’t move there, she said “I am surrounded by all these holy sites and our Jesus was born here. In this village we are 80 percent Christian and I feel safe in the midst of my friends. There is much to do here, even if it only means surviving.”

Pride can rope us into a false sense of independence. On our own, potential partnership with God never quite figures into the scene. When we trust the promises of God, we can celebrate a faith that does not rest in individualism or isolation; it is an invitation to mutuality with God and with others.

We rejoice in a promise that builds a community of persons working toward perfect love with God and neighbor, a community of faith, a community of hope, a community we call the church -- not a stale predictable church but a hopeful excited community that waits for the unexpected, participates in impossible dreams, and finds the promise of God beginning here and now. The wilderness of distrust, injustice, fear, sorrow, and loneliness is not the end of the story. When we respond with laughter and hope to God’s promises of new life in Christ Jesus, our wilderness is renamed, our lives are reclaimed, and God’s promise is fulfilled.