

“A Tough One” sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian church Sept. 13, 2009

TEXT: Mark 8:27-38: 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?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 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.’

“This is a tough one.” So stated the Worship Committee at the Summer Worship Retreat, where we worked on this gospel text. Unanimously and unambiguously, the first comment was: “This is hard.” And it is. Of all the Gospel writers, Mark, like Jesus in the text, speaks plainly. And he doesn’t care if it is uncomfortable or demanding.

The Committee remarked that so many of the phrases in this reading are familiar – Get thee behind me Satan, Take up your cross and follow, Forfeit your soul, Who do you think I am? But we usually hear them separately, out of context. Together they have a huge impact. And context is vital to a full understanding.

Carol told us how this is a turning point for Mark’s gospel. Up to this point Jesus has been travelling around Galilee and into Gentile territory. From this point on, Jesus turns toward Jerusalem. This is his first prediction of the coming passion. But consider the impact of where it took place. I visited Caesarea Philippi, and it is beautiful, lush and green, with a spring inside a kind of cave at the foot of Mount Hermon. Ancient Greeks considered it the birth place of the god Pan, so there are numerous shrines to Pan around the cave, as well as altars to other pagan gods. Then, if you lift your eyes, you see the remains of a magnificent marble temple Herod the Great built it in 19 BC dedicated to his patron, the Roman Emperor Augustus. Remembering the impact on me, in 2009, I can well imagine the impact on the disciples, standing there in the shadow of two empires, as Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" "Who do You say I am?"

As we heard, the easy answer of Peter was not the right answer. He had the right word but the wrong idea. Jesus did not come to be the victorious hero rescuing the Israelites from oppression. He would not mirror the typical Roman type of savior. In this moment, Jesus redefines both messiah and disciple.

To be a follower is not simply to name Jesus with the correct title. It is to face the danger and the hard consequences of opposing the values and worldview that the Empire imposed on everyone it conquered. Would they be able to follow Jesus, even in the shadows of the lure of paganism and the power of the Empire?

The context of this reading puts that question squarely to us as well. In the shadow of what empires do we live? How do we conduct our lives in the shadow of these empires? Do our values and pursuits align more closely with secular world views than with the worldview of Jesus?

Give up your life to save it. Forfeit self. Tough words indeed. And our group discussed them at length. The message is not as direct as accepting our inevitable physical deaths. The word translated as LIFE is *psuche*, the root word for psyche and psychology. It involves the very notion of self.

The group said it feels like an invitation to martyrdom, a mandate to leave the world behind; or else. It seems like a warning similar to Lady Wisdom's warning. And the either/or-ness is unsettling.

They asked each other, How do we connect self-actualization and self-esteem, with "denying ourselves"? Aren't they in conflict? Don't I have to know myself first before I give it up?

Perhaps Jesus is telling us that the only way we can truly find our deepest authenticity is in surrendering control and following Jesus. Perhaps the message is that when we trust, we discover. When we stop looking, we find.

Losing your life means giving up what we think we want in the moment, here and now, for the happiness, joy, and freedom we can find in the long run. We might gain the world but we forfeit our soul, which is our ability to merge with the divine and move into a deeper experience of life and love. The energy we spend trying to control and save and secure our lives leads eventually and inevitably to our losing them.

The prophet Mohammed said, "Die before you die."

The Sufi mystic Rumi said, "Lose your life, if you seek eternity."

Martin Luther King, Jr. said "A man who won't die for something is not fit to live."

And none other than singer Bob Dylan wrote, "Jesus tapped me on the shoulder and said, Bob, why are you resisting me? I said, I'm not resisting you! He said, You gonna follow me? I said, I've never thought about that before! He said, When you're not following me, you're resisting me."

The opportunity to be fully present to life, the ability to hear the whisperings of Wisdom and be open to her call, the freedom to receive the gifts offered by God—these have everything to do with letting go of our own self-appointed control; letting go and trusting God; recognizing that, as Darryl used to say, “There is a God and it’s not me.” Jesus invites us to let go of our grip enough to create a holy space for the gift of God’s presence, right here and right now.

The cross represents our ultimate surrender. To follow Jesus is to move in the opposite direction of violence and negativity. It is the choice not to fight, not to engage in retaliation or vengeance or retribution. We really hurt ourselves when we hurt each other. To follow Jesus is the way of humility, freedom from the bondage of self.

In Mark, Jesus is as Jesus does. At the core, Mark is a narrative of Jesus’ actions that reveal the realm of God. Mark does not have an extended collection of Jesus teachings, like Matthew. He does not have a wide-ranging compilation of Jesus parables, as does Luke. He does not record lengthy dialogs between Jesus and others, or even longer monologues by Jesus, as John does. In contrast, this gospel offers a rapid-fire sequencing of actions. Jesus heals, Jesus exorcises, Jesus calms the sea. The wisdom of the God whom Jesus has come to reveal takes shape in the power Jesus exercises to save – which is simply a religious way of saying, the power to do what is good.

The wisdom that Mark brings is that the gospel offers a very different way of power – through servant hood. Servant hood exercises power by asking what can be done for another’s good, rather than insisting, what is in this for me. We do not follow Jesus so that our lives will be easier, or so that we will “not go to hell when we die,” or because we will win friends and influence people -- but because we are answering a call to service. “How can I use the gifts, talents and abilities with which I have been entrusted, for God’s work of giving life to all of creation?”

Jesus said, "Who do they say that I am?" They replied, some say Elijah, some John the Baptist, others one of the prophets. And he said, “but who do YOU say that I am”? Peter answered, "You are the ground of our being, the ontological kerygma in which we find the ultimate meaning of our interpersonal relationships." And Jesus said, "What?"

Don’t complicate it more than it is already. Yes this is a hard passage, a tough one. But only if we remain attached to outcomes of our own choosing, expectations that suit us. We are called to let go of everything that closes our ears to Wisdom, hardens our hearts to others, blurs our vision of a world according to God, shackles our feet as we try to follow, binds our hands as we ache to reach out to others.

Our Worship Committee study group ended up with a consensus: to forfeit self is to move to simplicity, to let go of outcome and perfectionism and to live in gratefulness and service. They decided that follow me means trust God to know what is right, start with God, claim Jesus first and then live into who and whose you are. In September we often make choices and set our priorities for the season ahead. Let us take up the challenge given by Jesus to choose the way of the cross, the way of life. May it be so.