



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, FEBRUARY 25, 2024
GENESIS 17:1-7,15-16; PSALM 22: 22-30; ROMANS 4:13-25; MARK 8:31-38

FOLLOWING JESUS INTO DEEPER LOVE

Mark 8:31-38 *[Jesus began to teach his disciples 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."]*

I'm one of those lucky people who get to eat pizza every Friday evening. Now, sometimes, I wish we would go someplace other than Zeke's in Kirkland, but this is where we gather each week with our middle son, Andy, his husband, Brian, and our two grandchildren, Dominic and Ariel. I just love being with the kids and it's also an opportunity to catch up with the adults to share what's going on in our busy lives. Now, son-in-law Brian is not a

church goer and, even though he's been in our lives for 15 years, he doesn't really understand what I do as a priest. But most people don't know what we do. Now remember, this year Ash Wednesday fell on February 14th which was also our cultural celebration of Valentine's Day. So, several weeks ago at one of our pizza gatherings Brian asked, "what are you doing for Valentines Day this year?" I said, "Hey, it's a big year, I will be rubbing dirt

on people's faces and reminding them that they are going to die.”¹ Brian said nothing but took a big swig of his beer. Welcome to Lent.

On this second Sunday in Lent, Jesus predicts his death for the first time. “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering,” Jesus tells his disciples. He must “be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” As people who live on the other side of the Resurrection, I think we miss the shocking power of these words. Jesus’ prediction shatters Peter’s hope. Remember, Peter and his companions were expecting a Messiah that would liberate them from Roman occupation and restore the Jewish people to the land that God promised. They’ve seen Jesus feed the multitudes, heal the sick, clear the temple, and raise the dead. They’ve heard him proclaim the arrival of a new and glorious kingdom that will never end and never fail. They have seen Jesus’ power, so why on earth is he talking about his death?

Could it be that suffering and death are intimate parts of the human experience? If Jesus is fully human, then why would he be exempted from human disappointment, struggle, suffering, and death? I must tell you. I totally identify with Peter. I certainly don’t

embrace suffering and, no, I haven’t reconciled with the reality that I am going to die. I quite willingly join our death-defying culture as I embrace the distractions that wealth, entertainment, fitness and beauty, alcohol, and leisure offer to keep me from realizing that I am aging, and I will die. But denying and ignoring something doesn’t make it go away, does it?

Jesus rebukes Peter’s denial and says, “get behind me.” The Greek verb used here suggests a leader commanding his followers to fall into formation behind him. He invites Peter to follow where Jesus is leading for followers “get behind” their leader. And then he announces to the crowd: “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.”

Oh dear, these are troublesome words. They have been used by people in abusive power relationships to keep suffering people in their places and deprive them of the agency to change their situations. Statements like this informed the Marxist critique of religion as the “opium of the masses”² that keeps

¹ I found this quote on an unsourced Facebook meme. I did use it during our pizza dinner, but it is not my original thought.

² Karl Marx, *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1844).

suffering people where they are and assures them that their suffering will earn them “the pie in the sky when you die.” Does God really mete out suffering to God’s beloved children and then reward them with heaven for putting up with the pain? Ugh, what is the image of God behind this theology? Please join us this Wednesday at the Contours of Christian Faith gathering as we explore your images of God. They are pretty important to your spirituality. I don’t think the kind of self-denial Jesus is talking about here is encouraging people to perpetuate their victimhood. Actually, true self-denial, the denial of self for the sake of love, can be empowering and liberating.

It was about 12 years ago when I met Chris³ (not his real name) on the inpatient oncology unit at Swedish hospital, First Hill. I was working as a palliative care chaplain at the time. If you aren’t aware of that term, palliative care is a medical specialty that helps people live better with a life-limiting illness. It can involve end-of-life issues, but it often concentrates upon pain and symptom management and optimizing a person’s quality of life. Our palliative care team was asked to consult because Chris’s oncologist was perplexed that Chris was refusing some treatments that were being offered. Chris was

only 35 years old, married, and father to two small children. His doctor didn’t understand why Chris didn’t want everything that was being offered to preserve his life.

When I met with Chris, he explained that he had been living with cancer for more than 15 years. Each time his cancer reappeared he would have surgery and chemotherapy. He told me, “My life has been a rollercoaster, but it’s been good. My cancer has come back 5 times. Early on, it was all about ‘fighting’ the cancer and doing everything to win the battle with the disease. Despite periods of remission and recurrence, I experienced three job promotions, I fell in love and got married, had two children, and lived my life as fully as I could. It’s been really hard, but I feel so blessed. My life is so full of love. Now I’m hearing that my cancer can’t be cured. I just want to live the best I can for as long as I have left. I want to play with my daughters and cuddle with my wife. I want to listen and learn more from my grandpa, because he’s a wise and loving man. I’ve finally realized that this is the life God has given me to live. I didn’t start really living until I accepted that I was dying.” I didn’t start really living until I accepted that I was dying.

³ The details of this story have been changed to de-identify “Chris” to protect his confidentiality.

Could it be that “taking up our cross” is to live life on life’s terms? To accept and live the life God has given you to live? To truly accept that disappointment, suffering, and death are intimate parts of the human experience? To take up a cross as Jesus did is to stand in the center of the world’s pain. Even more importantly, to show up and enter into another’s suffering and be with them is taking up *their* cross, easing their way, and truly being with them in their suffering. This is what it means to have compassion, for the word comes from the Latin *con passio*, “to suffer with.” This is what it means to get behind Jesus and follow him. Yes, we follow him to the cross, but we also share in his Resurrection.

On Ash Wednesday, as I was rubbing dirt on people’s faces and reminding them that they are going to die, I had one patient ask me to refrain from tracing a cross in ashes on her head. She asked, “since it’s Valentine’s Day, can you put a heart on my forehead instead of a cross?” The liturgist in me recoiled as I did what she requested, but then I softened as I looked at the large heart, made of ashes, on her head. It was unexpectedly beautiful. She said, “The cross and a heart. They’re really the same thing. Because it’s all about love, right?” Yes, indeed. It’s all about love. It’s all about love.



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