

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ They answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ Then he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. ³¹ 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. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on divine things, but on human things.” ³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any wish to follow me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ 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.”

Response to the Word

L: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

P: Thanks be to God!

Mark 8:27-38

02/25/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“Peter’s Confession”

Rev. Amy Terhune

This coming week, folks from all over the world will gather in Anchorage, Alaska for the start of the Iditarod Sled Dog Race, which commemorates the Great Serum Run of 1925, when sled dogs were used to rush antitoxin for Diphtheria from Anchorage up to Nome, Alaska, some 1000 miles away. Back in 1925, the serum was put on a train for 268 miles, and teams of sled dogs ran the remaining 700 miles or so in just under 5 days, passing the serum off from one team to the next in a relay of sorts. Today, the Iditarod Sled Dog Race takes about two weeks, as the race responds to criticism from animal lovers and activists to provide more humane conditions for the dogs that run in the extreme cold through blizzards, white-outs, and the rigors of the wild Alaskan wilderness.

I share all this to point us to a the fact that “...the world of sled dog racing is famous for a truism: “If you aren’t the lead dog, the scenery never changes.”

“In other words, only the lead dog gets to see what is up ahead... For the rest of the pack, there is nothing but a view of bushy backsides.” Which leads Leonard Sweet to say, “No wonder in life we are all constantly striving to be “lead dogs.”

“We all want to be “large and in charge.” Who doesn’t want to chart our own destiny? Who doesn’t want to choose our life pathway? Who doesn’t want to decide for oneself? But it sure does seem like Jesus had a rather startling response to that kind of an attitude: “Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!”

“Jesus’ harsh “rebuke” of Peter (“rebuke” here is a word used in demonic exorcisms) doesn’t sound so bad when it is directed at a dimwit disciple who had the audacity to try and tell Jesus he was wrong. It is another thing to have Jesus’ words directed at each one of us, reminding twenty-first century disciples that none of us are “lead dogs,” that none of us get to be “large and in charge.” Jesus’ disciples are reminded in today’s gospel text to “know our place.” And where is our “place?”

Our place is “behind” Jesus... Yet there is nothing that rankles our spirit and yanks our chain quite as much as being told to “know our place.” [4 ¶s from “Do You Know Your Place?” by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.]

But before you get up and walk out in disgust, consider this: Last week, Jesus faced temptation in the wilderness. We talked about how he was ‘driven’ out there, but not by sin which ‘drove’ Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Rather, it was love for humanity that ‘drove’ Jesus out there to where people suffer. In Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts, Jesus repels the temptation to rule the world by military force, power, control. Jesus’ power is love, and our ‘place’ is behind the author of love, the harbinger of hope, the conqueror of death. I can’t think of any ‘place’ I’d rather be. Even better, we have been told that we have a ‘place’—a place in Jesus’ heart and in God’s plan. We are precious, sacred, created in God’s image and likeness and called ‘good’. Would that more people understood *that* place is, by grace, *their* place. I know my place. Thank God, I know my place.

But I also know myself. I am utterly human in every sense, both the good and the bad. And like Peter, I struggle to wrap my mind around divine things. In our lesson this morning, Peter starts off on the right track. He knows and declares Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus is the one sent from God to redeem the world. Jesus is the anointed one of God. This is Peter’s confession.

Yet according to that great font of wisdom, Yogi Berra, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it." Well, our Scripture lesson this morning from Mark 8 is exactly that: a theological fork in the road. This chapter is the hinge of Mark’s gospel. Not only is this the exact middle of Mark in terms of chapter and verse—Mark has 16 chapters, we’re in chapter 8—it is also theologically the center point at which the ministry of Jesus takes a decisive turn toward the cross. According to Mark, Jesus knows what he is doing and where he is headed. He knows the direction his life must take. But the disciples don’t. For them, Mark 8 does present a kind of fork in the road. And like Yogi Berra, as they look at the fork in the road, they want to take it—they want it both ways. They want to stick with Jesus and be his followers while at the same time insisting that Jesus follow them down the path they want to take. [from Scott Hoezee, *The Lenten Fork*, illustrations on Mark 8:31-38, www.Sermons.com.] Peter confesses Christ to be the Messiah, and then has the audacity to say: No, Lord, not your way. Let’s do it my way. You are the lead dog, after all. Aren’t you?

I suppose Peter represents yet another temptation Jesus faces, after conquering temptation in the wilderness last week. And so Jesus confronts it: Get behind me, Satan.

The heart of this text is about how hard it is to really live a life of faith. To put one’s mind on divine things is both hard and costly. Billy Graham has said, “Salvation is free, but discipleship costs everything we have. Salvation comes in a moment, but discipleship claims the whole of our lives.” And Jesus tells us the same thing. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Which sounds a little crazy, doesn’t it? Take up your cross. When he says this, he’s not telling us to endure through hard circumstances we’d just as soon not choose to take on. To be sure, endurance plays an important role. But it’s really about choices. You have to take up the cross. He’s calling us to choose it.

Bearing a cross is first and foremost a choice—a choice between setting our mind on divine things or human things. It’s how we identify with Christ; it’s how we imitate him. During my seminary days, I had a professor named Dick Nesmith—an actual ordained United Methodist Clergyman. He had served churches all of his life. He continued to serve and teach at the same time. He taught Sociology of Religion, which is one of the courses we all had to take our very last semester in Seminary, as we’re preparing to graduate and take our first appointments. As an academic lecturer, he was—to put it plainly—pretty dull. But we all paid attention, because Dr. Nesmith had a knack for dropping nuggets of information into his lecture. Practical, invaluable nuggets of advice and wisdom for pastoring a local church. I couldn’t tell you anything about Sociology of Religion anymore—I don’t remember what he tested us on. But I remember some his nuggets. One of the most powerful lessons he graced us with was a list of things we would encounter if we persevered in ministry.

He told us, “If you are in ministry long enough, you WILL—guaranteed—you WILL bury a child; you WILL have a couple come to stand before you on their wedding day, and one of them will say “I don’t”; you WILL witness a death in the middle of a worship service; you WILL see church politics kill the spirits of clergy and churches; you WILL see old age take a vibrant, energetic senior and transform them into a shadow of their former self, you WILL face gut-wrenching conflict and merciless criticism; you WILL see infidelity tear apart marriages, you WILL encounter tragedies, suicides, car accidents, cancer, death before it’s time; and you WILL be called upon to represent the presence of God in all those situations. You will take on suffering that isn’t yours. You will NOT be able to shield yourself from the stuff nightmares are made of. So you’d better be ready, because if you are truly fulfilling your calling, loving your congregation, serving God, then it will hurt like hell.” And I remember thinking, somewhat sarcastically: Now don’t sugarcoat it for us, professor. Be ready? How does one possibly prepare oneself for stuff like that? You don’t. You just learn to get out of the way and let the Holy Spirit do its thing.

What I’ve since discovered is that my professor’s advice is for more than just soon-to-be-pastors. If we live long enough, we’ll all see such things. That’s not pastoral ministry. That’s life. If we are truly disciples of Christ, we will take on suffering that isn’t ours, we will hurt. That’s what it means to pick up your cross and follow Jesus. He serves, so we serve. He loves, so we love. He hurts, so we hurt. He suffers, so we suffer. He dies, so we die. But it logically follows that if He lives, we live.

To take up the cross and follow is to identify with Christ. It is also to identify with those who suffer. We have a mind for others. In *Guideposts Magazine*, Arthur Gordon tells about a kindergarten class being encouraged to think beyond themselves.

“According to a story, Arthur visited a kindergarten class where the teacher frequently reminded misbehaving children to stop being a WAM. The kids straightened up as soon as their teacher pointed out they were being a WAM.

“What was a WAM? Why was being a WAM so bad? The teacher explained that WAM stands for “What About Me?” She was training the children to be less self-centered. She wanted them to think of others’ needs, not just their own. So, she taught them that no one liked a WAM, a self-centered person who only asked, “What About Me?” Instead, this teacher was teaching the children to be a WAY, or as she explained it, people who ask, “What About You?”

“You and I are people of the WAY. We ask, “What About You?” [3 ¶s from “At Cross Purposes” by Billy D. Strayhorn, www.Sermons.com.]

I recall a seemingly-innocent little ditty from the Stage Production of *The Sound of Music* called “*No Way to Stop It*”, in which the Elsa Schrader and Max Detweiler attempt to convince Captain VonTrap that he’s foolish to worry about the Third Reich, and that his only concern should be himself:

That all-absorbing character—
That fascinating creature—
That super-special feature—Me!

to which the captain responds:

So every star and every whirling planet,
And every constellation in the sky
Revolve around the center of the universe:
A lovely thing called I?

[from *The Sound of Music* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein
at <https://rodgersandhammerstein.com/song/the-sound-of-music/no-way-to-stop-it/>]

And as Max and Elsa dance around the stage, the Captain turns his back on them with bafflement, because he knows that those only concerned with “me” will ultimately lose themselves.

Bearing a cross is a choice. It is what identifies us with Christ. It necessarily requires that we imitate Jesus—that we follow his lead in sacrificing for the sake of others. Bearing a cross will change us, turn our minds to divine things. Bearing a cross calls us out of our comfort zones. Jesus says that if we would be his followers, then we must deny ourselves—our own wants, our own wishes, even perhaps, our own needs. Bearing a cross is an exercise, not only in obedience, but in trust.

Several years ago, Bruce Springsteen released a song called *Jack of All Trades*.

I'll mow your lawn, clean the leaves out of your drain;
I'll mend your roof to keep out the rain;
I'll take the work that God provides;
I'm a jack of all trades, honey, we'll be alright.

I'll hammer the nails, and I'll set the stone;
I'll harvest your crops when they're ripe and grown;
I'll pull that engine apart and patch her up 'til she's running right;
I'm a jack of all trades, we'll be alright.

A hurricane blows, brings a hard rain;
When the blue sky breaks, feels like the world's gonna change;
We'll start caring for each other like Jesus said that we might;
I'm a jack of all trades, we'll be alright...

Now sometimes tomorrow comes soaked in treasure and blood;
Here we've stood the drought, now we'll stand the flood;
There's a new world coming, I can see the light;
I'm a jack of all trades, darling, we'll be alright.

[From Bruce Springsteen – “Jack Of All Trades” Lyrics

<http://www.hotnewsonglyrics.com/bruce-springsteen-jack-of-all-trades-lyrics.html>.]

Of course, the song is about doing what you have to in order to survive today's economic conditions. But there's an undercurrent of faith and hope in the song that touches me. The struggles we face sometimes remind us of what's most important, like caring for each other. So maybe 'being alright' isn't about keeping the house or the car as much as it is about keeping our souls and our perspective—and maybe in taking our place behind Jesus, we may not just see light, but be light, leaving the world better for having been here. Now you may think it's strange that I would end a sermon on taking up a cross and denying oneself by sharing words to a song with a refrain 'we'll be alright'. But it occurred to me that a Jack of all trades isn't what one does, but who one is—a person open to change, ready to seize opportunities, able to see possibilities, willing to trust, prepared to do what it takes. And of course, the second half of that phrase is this: I'm a jack of all trades, a master of none. But we follow the master of all, the lead dog, and even though we may not see the WAY, we're following one who does – one shaping a new world coming, and we can be part of it; even here; even now. Peter's confession can be ours: You are the Messiah. You are the Master of all. Behind you is my place.

We have a choice. We can lay down the cross we have been given to bear and passively live life with no challenge to change, to sacrifice, to suffer, or to live—or we can take it up and be transformed, living for something greater than ourselves: The Kingdom of God, the new world coming. I don't like suffering or sacrifice. I don't like change and alternative routes. I don't like the bruised shoulder that comes with a cross. I don't always do well with any of it. But I know my sin. I know my worth. I know my leader. And even when I fail to live the WAY, see the way, or understand the way, I know my place. Thanks be to God. Amen.