

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Rough
February 25, 2024
Mark 8:31–38

Let us pray for the presence of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

O God, you are the Creator of the universe, holy and powerful, yet you have approached us and have shown us the human face of your love in Jesus, your Son, our Savior. He revealed your love and mercy by living as he did, serving others and accepting them as people made in your image and likeness. He pointed us towards a world in which each and every person could realize his or her identity as a precious child of yours. He even gifted us with the Holy Spirit so that the very fabric of our existence is woven with the thread of his life. Let us listen now to your spirit. Pour out your gifts of grace, mercy, and wisdom so that this time of worship be a true reflection of our thanksgiving, wonder, and praise over such blessings. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The reading assigned for today, as indicated in your bulletin, is from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 8, verses 31 through 38, but I want to back up a little further to give the story a little more context. I want to back up to verse 27 for the reading. This section in Mark, is in many ways a pivot or hinge in the entire gospel - prior to where I am about to read, Jesus and the disciples have traveled throughout the region, in Jerusalem and Nazareth, and by the Sea of Galilee. As they have traveled Jesus has taught and preached, he has performed several healings, he has calmed the storm and walked on water, he has fed the multitudes with meager supplies, he has questioned religious authorities, and he has reached out to those not a part of his tribe.

The disciples have seen all of this, all of the miracles, the healings, the people listening to his teaching and following him, the questions, and the inclusion of the other. And then an important question from Jesus to the disciples is posed by Jesus. Here is where we pick up the reading, again starting at verse 27, listen for the word of God.

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

²⁷Jesus 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?" ²⁸And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³¹Then 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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."

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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,^[i] will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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.”

The question that Jesus asks is fundamental to our faith. In one way or another, every person who follows Jesus, must ask themselves, “who do you say that I am?” Peter gives the immediate and correct-for-the-test response “You are the Messiah.” He has given the “right” answer. But Jesus goes further and confounds Peter.

Jesus begins to teach the disciples and all of those gathered around what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. He tells them that he will undergo great suffering, be rejected by the religious leadership, and be killed, and be raised from the dead three days later. Seemingly, no one has heard this last part. They are still in shock from the first statement about Jesus having to suffer, being rejected, and being killed. It is so shocking that Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him.

I can just picture Peter shooting glances at Jesus and the other disciples as Jesus begins to talk to the crowds. A sense of bewilderment and anger bubbling up in him until he can’t contain it any longer and has to grab Jesus and pull him away from the crowd. And in a whispered shout saying to Jesus, “What are you talking about? What do you mean about suffering and rejection? What do you mean, you are going to be killed? Didn’t you just hear me say a few minutes ago that you are the Messiah? You are the new king! You will sit on the throne of David! Don’t talk to these people about suffering and rejection!”

But Jesus cuts Peter’s tirade off and admonishes Peter that he is not thinking of divine things, but of human things. Jesus is going to be a different kind of Messiah, a different kind of king.

This story fits in with lent and the talk of denial. And in many respects, it continues the theme we discussed last week in the covenant with Noah, that we have a God that defies expectations and shows up in a self-giving, self-sacrificing way. We have a God that wants to be in relationship with us, so much so that we have a God that shows up and puts limits on Godself in order to be in relationship with us. But there is something more in this story than the Noah story.

Jesus goes further, and tells the crowd, not only will he suffer, but any who would follow him, will follow the same path. Will deny themselves and take up the cross. This really isn't what Peter, and the disciples are expecting.

Frankly, I think some of us find the cross difficult. We know the end of the story, we know Easter is coming, but Peter didn't. Perhaps we miss or we discount the shock of this story and the demands of this story because we already know the end of the story. We view this story and this call to pick up the cross in hindsight. We know that suffering is overcome, and we already know that death does not have the final say. So, given that, who wants to focus on suffering and rejection, who wants to think about following Jesus into hardship and self-denial?

Before I say more about what it might mean for us to deny ourselves, what it might look like to take up a cross and lose our lives in order to gain our life, I need to say what it is not about. This is not about suffering at the hands of an abuser, and this is not about self-hatred.

I don't think Jesus is calling us into some kind of theology and life where we are walked on and over like a doormat. Often you will hear someone say, "Well, that's their cross to bear," indicating that they need to suffer through some trouble and there is nothing to be done. This cannot be the case in terms of abuse. There is no room for abuse in healthy relationships. Abuse, wherever and whenever possible, should

not be propped up by a misreading of this scripture. Jesus isn't asking us to subject ourselves to torment and abuse.

The other way in which I think this scripture is misread beyond justification for abusive relationships, is when the passage is interpreted to generate self-hatred. I remember many years ago in a seminary class, I got into a discussion with some other Presbyterian students about ordination of LGBTQ people in the church. This was before the passage of the amendment which changed the rules in the Book of Order allowing for LGBTQ people to be ordained or same sex couples to be married. Some of the other students were fairly conservative in their theology and the conversation was, let me just say, animated. At the apex of the conversation, we were talking about what it meant to be made in the image of God, and I said something to the effect of, "I just can't imagine a God that would ask a person to fundamentally deny who they are." As soon as I said it, I wished I could have had the words back, because I knew what was coming. Boom – Mark 8 – "deny yourself and take up the cross."

I do not find anything in scripture or in the life of Jesus, that suggests that we are to deny our own basic human needs and that we should think of "ourselves as not deserving of love, dignity, and respect."ⁱ Self-denial that Jesus talks about is not self-hatred. The kind of giving over of oneself that Jesus is talking about is a giving out of a place of love, which is very different from someone taking it from us, or someone trying to deny who we really are. We have a god that has made us in God's image and declared it good. We have a God who counts the numbers of hairs on our heads. We have a God that says that I, that we all matter to God. We have a God that loves us so much, that God shows up. The way of the cross is not a way of abuse or a hatred of our very selves.

At the same time, Jesus does call us to deny the self. And many of us, I think, know what this denial of self looks like in a healthy way. The self-denial that Jesus speaks of is a denial of continually putting ourselves at the center, and refusing to go it alone. There is so much in our culture that tells us the self is the most important thing, and interestingly, there is so much that tells us that we are not enough. So, the thing to do to achieve that wholeness, that happiness, that self-fulfillment is to buy the latest product to gratify our immediate desires to make us happy. Or we go to the bookstore and see shelf after shelf of self-help books, again looking for the secret to make us enough.

And some of those products might be great, and there is probably really good information in some of the books. But none of it “will actually make us feel complete, or more human, or more adequate, or more accepted or loved. They just won’t. The only thing that does that is connection to others and the community those connections bring.

And connecting to others in order to fashion and nurture community requires sacrifice. There’s just no getting around it. And the marvelous thing is that when we stop worrying about gratifying our wants and instead look to the needs around us, and others begin to do the same, we find more than we’d ever imagined, more life, more joy, more happiness, more acceptance, because we find a whole community looking out for us instead of only ourselves, just as we are looking out for the community of persons around us.”ⁱⁱ

What I find amazing is that love is one of those commodities that never seems to run out – in fact, the more of it you give away, the more it seems to grow. The more we give, the more we receive. The more we seek to be kind the more kindness that comes back to us. The more we love, the more we are loved.

I think the self-denial that Jesus is talking about, is about giving over to an understanding that we are not independent of ourselves. In order to be in relationship, it requires giving of oneself, freely. The cross represents God's commitment to us, and Jesus asks the same from us.

One writer says, "To take up a cross as Jesus did is to stand in the center of the world's pain. Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating that pain, no matter what it costs."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Jesus' charge is not a demand to deny our true selves. It's an invitation to imagine that your self needs the other. Desperately. Intimately. Because this is what to be human is all about, intimacy. Belonging. Relationship. Attention... We can't be ourselves on our own." As one writer says, when we are about ourselves, "it is a self-absorbed existence. It is to become narcissistic in its truest form, where those around you are only pawns to placate your self-perceived power and importance."^{iv}

Perhaps, then, this denial of self is a realization that we can't live in this world, we can't live our lives, without our very selves being in relationship. And to be in relationship requires that we give of ourselves, our true and whole selves, that in giving we receive, and in loving others we are loved. And it requires vulnerability. And sometimes it means it will hurt. But to give and receive love, this is a self-denial for which I am willing to follow.

Amen.

ⁱ David Lose – in the meantime. <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/lent-2-b/>

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2930-gains-and-losses>

^{iv} Karoline Lewis, “Dear Working Preacher” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3542>