

Taking up our cross

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC, on February 25, 2018

http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Lent/BLent2_RCL.html

Our Gospel lesson today should actually begin a few verses earlier in the 8th chapter of Mark. Today's reading picks up verse 31, but to get the whole picture, we need to go back to verse 27. Read (or listen) and see if this gives us a better, different image of the setting...

(27) 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.
(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. 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.'

It's a stunning parallel of images especially the exchange between Jesus and Peter. One moment Peter is confessing Jesus as the long-awaited, much-hoped-for Messiah, a Messiah that most people thought would bring an end to Roman occupation and restore the monarchy as it was under King David. Ahhh. Those were the days of legend, the days when things were so good and Israel was, at least in their own mind, a world leader. And Peter had said it out loud. "You are the Messiah." Surely, surely, now those good say were coming again!

But not so fast. And don't call him "shirley." Because the next thing out of Jesus' mouth, to his disciples and all those around him, is that he is going to die. And it won't be quick and it won't be painless. And it won't only be because of the Roman occupiers. It will be at the hands of the very religious leaders that Peter and James and John and all the others were raised to admire and revere and trust.

It's a tough moment in Mark's telling of the Jesus story, and it turns on a dime.

True discipleship, true following of Jesus, is not measured by what we gain, but what we are willing to give, and by what we are willing to give up. It is great that Peter, like most of the disciples back then, didn't have a clue what all that entailed. And the painful reality for 21st Century American followers of Jesus is that we don't know much about truly giving up something to follow Jesus.

(And if you do have a story about that, please come see me. Call me. Let's get coffee or lunch or go for a bike ride. I'd love to hear that story. The world needs to hear it. Other Christians and non-Christians need to hear what true discipleship really is, that it's not about what you get, but what it is you give and what you are willing to lose.)

Peter, who had already walked away from his fishing business, was not really prepared to hear this death and dying nonsense from Jesus. Even the promise of resurrection, ***which Jesus says in this passage***, isn't enough to stop the ever-foot-eating Peter from telling Jesus to knock-it-off.

Like many of us, Peter would rather focus on Jesus the healer and teacher and pot-stirrer than to talk about Jesus the Messiah who had to die. Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection was made even more stunning when he talks about taking up one's cross and following him.

Next Sunday's epistle reading has the Apostle Paul telling the church in Corinth that the Cross is "foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

The Roman Empire, and Pontius Pilate specifically, used crucifixion as a means to not only kill, but to humiliate the prisoner, his or her family, the whole village, and to set a very public example that Rome would not be challenged, mocked, or otherwise threatened. Jesus' hearers knew what the cross meant. Many of them had likely seen or heard about the Galilean insurrection about 20 or so years before Jesus' ministry in which over 2,000 people were crucified. That's not a moment soon forgotten in any community.

If being the Messiah, and following the Messiah, meant **that**, then, well, you can see why Peter blurted out what he did to to try and change Jesus' direction.

But the way we humans think things "should be" is very rarely the way of God. About 500 years ago, Martin Luther wrote about the difference between *theologia gloria* and *theologia crucis*. A theology of praise and glory vs. a theology of the cross. A theology of

praise and glory leads us down the road to the Prosperity Gospel and only to images of Jesus with bunnies and flowers looking more like that scene from *The Sound of Music*. And there is so, so much more to following Jesus than that. The theology of the cross tells that God's mercy is not reserved for the righteous and the faithful but for sinners of all stripes; that God's strength is shown in weakness, not grand displays of power, that privilege and prestige do not equal God's blessing, but service to God and neighbor is what God desires for human kind.

I have said from this pulpit on countless occasions that God will rarely, if ever, do what we expect God to do. In seeing Jesus' interaction with Peter in today's reading, that has never been more true.

God is not conformed to human expectations or desires or political agendas. God is found in uncertainty and danger and even in suffering -- all those places where humanity is too quick to say God is not present.

But God is always present.

The presence of God was no more or less evident at Christ Church, New Bern, on Ash Wednesday, February 14th, than it was, and always had been, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, the same day. And God will be present at the next tragedy or disaster and the next and the next. Because wherever people of faith are, God is, too. Whether it is a natural disaster or a man-made one, God's presence will be seen and felt in those who help make the suffering less.

There's not much we can do to prevent the natural disasters -- the hurricanes, tornadoes, floods. But there are some things we can do to prevent the man-made ones. Jesus calls his disciples and followers to deny themselves and take up their cross. What indeed does it gain us to have the whole world just as we want it, yet lose our life or our children's lives to keep it that way? We heard just a few weeks ago from the Apostle Paul in another part of his letter to Corinth about being willing to put aside something we hold dear, that may not be a big deal to us, putting that aside if it means someone else can grow in their faith and have their life continue to thrive as the person God made them to be.

We all have something thing in us that needs to be set aside, something in ourselves that we need to deny so that we can more closely follow Jesus and help others to do the same.

What's yours?

What is our culture's?

And what are you going to do about it?

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