

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Mark 8:31-38

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Edgy Truths

People often ask me how decisions get made about the hymns we sing. Well it is pretty simple. Mostly the pastor, that would be me, chooses them. They hopefully fit the theme of the day and bring us more deeply into God’s presence in the singing. Often, however, I will consult with Michael. I don’t really read music all that well, and I often need his help to know if something is singable or not.

This week was a case in point. I was looking for a middle hymn, something to complement the scripture, the sermon. So I looked to the very helpful booklet Michael made me over a year ago, the one where he went through our entire hymnal and made comments about each one of the hymns. “Michael,” I said, “I’ve found a hymn whose words I like ... but your only comment here is “sort of edgy”?”

“Well, why not go with that?” he said. “Lent is a good time to be edgy –don’t you think?”

Out of this brief exchange a sermon title emerged. For Jesus interaction with Peter, his words to Peter and to all the disciples, this scripture lesson today – well the bible doesn’t get much more edgy than that! But the truth is, I don’t want to focus on Peter and his rebuking Jesus, or on Jesus rebuking him. I don’t want to focus on Jesus calling Peter Satan, or on the irony that though Peter recognizes who Jesus is – the Messiah, the one sent by God – he still wants to instruct Jesus on what sort of Messiah he should be.

I don’t want to focus on how, for Peter, suffering, rejection, and death

are not on his agenda. And I don't want to focus on how Peter got hung up more than once on success – on being successful himself, and on Jesus being successful too.

No, I want to focus on something more positive. There is a teaching here that is more than rebuke. There is a teaching here that is *an invitation* -- If we but have the ears to hear it.

In his book *Immortal Diamond: The Search for our True Self* Franciscan priest and spiritual writer Richard Rohr shares a story, reportedly true, about a young couple putting their newborn in the nursery for the night. Their four-year-old son said to them "I want to talk to the baby!" They said "Yes, you can talk to him from now on" But he pressed further saying "I want to talk to him now, and by myself!" Surprised and curious, they let the young boy into the nursery and cupped their ears to the door, wondering what he might be saying. This is what they reportedly heard their son saying to his baby brother: "Quick, tell me where you came from. Quick, tell me who made you? I am beginning to forget!" (*Immortal Diamond*, p. 10)

Rohr asks us to consider if that might be true. That this is what Jesus meant when he said we would have to become like little children to "get it"...that we have a connection, an origin, a true self that we come into the world with that can, alas, with time in the world, get tainted, lost, or forgotten? Most spirituality, in fact, says our problem is this amnesia. Religion's job, Rohr says, is purely and simply one thing: To tell us and keep reminding us of who we objectively are. (*Immortal Diamond*, p. 11)

This is an interesting lens through which to view our scripture today. What if what Jesus was saying to Peter wasn't just that you, Peter, are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things but something more like Peter, you are speaking from your False Self and not your True Self. You have to lay that False Self down if you are going to wake up to your True Self. And you'll find your true self in following me, not in instructing me what to do!"

This has, for me, been a week of a lot of lying around. The flu will do that to you. A lot of lying around, and a lot of Olympics, watching so much so that oh my goodness, I have those repetitive ads nearly memorized. But the Olympics always bring great lessons. I was so struck this year by how grateful so many of the athletes were. They spoke with such joy on their faces not for their medals, but for the chance to compete, the people who have supported them, and the "whole Olympic experience". So many expressions of gratitude.

Then there was the Canadian women's hockey player who wasn't so grateful. Still devastated after losing after an overtime period and then a shootout, she pulled off the silver medal that was placed around her neck. In that moment, all she could feel was the loss, the disappointment. She has since apologized. I am sure in time she will be able to feel pride for what got her team that far.

But in that moment, she was consumed by the thought that they hadn't come to South Korea for silver. In that moment her better self didn't come through.

In our scripture today, Jesus is contrasting the way of the cross -- discipleship and servanthood -- with the other, more common way of being in the world: which is to say the ego-driven, agenda driven, success - oriented life which Jesus is, in effect saying is *not really life*. Oh yes, we'd like to escape such eventualities as being a disappointment to ourselves and others, we'd like to escape rejection, and having our energies come to naught. We'd like to escape loss, and our own suffering and death.... but truthfully, it's not in the cards. These are the edgy truths of the gospel, despite any preachers who may try to tell us otherwise, you know, that loving Jesus will bring us wealth, security, success -- the "prosperity gospel" this is called -- and maybe their bibles have this passage today highlighted with a black highlighter, so it just never gets lifted up... I don't know.

Some months ago you recognized my having been in ordained ministry twenty-five years. In a most honest tribute, my husband shared how it was really my experience of having gone to a church that basically beat me up and spit me out that made me a pastor. Seriously. Growing up, my father often would say to my mother, when she was busy criticizing him "But you are losing sight of how wonderful I am!" Well, I am telling you, those people in that church, they definitely lost sight of how wonderful I was! And of course, in time, long after I left that place, I could see I wasn't all that wonderful. I spoke more than I listened. I cared more about preaching than humbly walking with people in their troubles. And I had a ministry agenda for them they just couldn't accept. I had a lot to learn, and I learned it in falling down -- and only when I could let go of the notion of how it was supposed to go, or how I was suppose to have been treated, only when I could let that fall from my grasp, only then could I rise and learn to be different.

So often when we hear the word "disciple" we picture men in long robes and sandals, and beards -- we picture Jesus first twelve. But to be a disciple means to be a *learner*. The invitation is to come on this journey, to learn what Jesus has to share about holding power differently: striving to be faithful more than striving to be successful and trusting in a presence more than seeking to live with concrete assurances as to how it is all going to end up.

Yesterday, here in this sanctuary a memorial service took place for Gordon Campbell, known to many of us. His family wanted it to be called a Celebration of Life and so it was. And maybe because I didn't have as much to prepare, because someone else was doing the homily, I had this sense of being part of a church that *listens*. A life has been lived. It has come to an end. And we pause. We listen. We can learn so much from one individual life -- from one who gave of himself in his own particular way. Gordon's niece said something lovely -- that Gordon showed his love for her in his smile. You come away from a funeral like that with a deeper perspective -- on the person's life, but also on your own. You come away from a funeral like that thinking I want to love my life. I want to be grateful, and do better,

and show love in my smile too. And that response I think is not so much about striving as it is about trusting that God is indeed bringing forth that True Self in each one of us.

As I grow older, I am often struck by how little we speak at memorial services of the accomplishments of the person who has died. We speak so much more of what the person teaches us about being human.

One of the things that helped me this week in preaching on this edgy text is to realize where it lands in Mark's gospel. Our scripture lessons do not really stand all on their own. This lesson comes in between two healing stories, both having to do with miracles of giving sight to the blind. And the first of these is the only story we know of that requires two stages for successful completion. After the first laying on of hands, the man could see, but not clearly. With the second laying on of hands, he saw everything clearly – a promise to those disciples, who, like Peter, see impulsively at first, that they will in time come to full understanding. (Jouette Bassler, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol 2, p. 73)

So, there is encouragement here. We none of us escape living in this world full of suffering. We do best when we don't try to escape it. Only then can we live authentically. Only then can we follow Jesus and find our true selves in the journey.

This is Lent's teaching today. It is edgy. But it is also full of grace.

Amen.