

Mark 8:27-38
September 16, 2012

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Jesus presents us with a truth to cling to this morning, albeit it a difficult one, as he states, "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." (Mark 8:35) It's a truth He is teaching His disciples as He explains to them the true nature of who He is and what he will do for them and for the sake of the world – undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed and after three days rise again.

Of course, before we get to this whole point of denying ourselves and taking up our crosses we hear Peter's rebuke of Jesus? No, Lord! This can't be so. Can we really fault Peter? After all, Jesus has just told him He is going to die. It's totally counter-cultural to everything He and the disciples know. Peter had just acknowledged Jesus is the Messiah; a title in Hebrew or translated Christ in Greek was associated in Jewish tradition with an anointed king, a royal figure from the line of David expected to come and free Israel from their oppressors and restore Israel's independence and glory. Thus, what else is there for Peter to do but turn inward and plead that Jesus put aside this nonsense of suffering and dying. Of what benefit would this be to Peter, the disciples, or the people of Israel living under Roman oppression.

When we encounter fear, doubt, incomprehension, or the unknown don't we often cling to what we know, what is safe, what will be of most benefit to us. Biblical scholar Alyce McKenzie states,

We cling for dear life to other people, money, possessions, alcohol or food or another substance, our looks, our youthfulness, the neighborhood we live in, the prestige of our job or how well our children are doing in school, sports, life. Both of our arms are occupied clinging to our lives—and we don't have an arm free to reach out to anyone else.¹

We get so occupied in saving our life that we ultimately lose it in separating ourselves from one another, from those closest to us, and from our relationship with God. In so doing we deny who the real source of life is inside each of us and we fall prey to the false promises that we are in ultimate control of our destinies and well-being. False promises, which often, rather than save or help us lead us to consume more and more and fall further into despair, debt, or brokenness.

Jesus calls those who follow him to a new way of life. One that isn't focused on looking out for "me (us) first" but one that emulates the way of life Jesus lived out which sought first the well-being of the other. This is what defined Jesus as the Messiah as he gave of himself in order that all who follow will no longer be bound by the shackles of sin and death but rather by life – new life in him.

I struggle from depression as do many and many thousands of people. It's a horrendously awful disease that has an ability to grab ahold of an individual and literally drain them of all energy, motivation, optimism, and the ability to see good in the world, hope for tomorrow, and that there are people to help. It's easy to stand up here and say "turn to Jesus" when a person so deeply mired in the chains of depression that bind them often can't do that or fails to hear Jesus' voice, feel his presence, or see him standing there with them. Depression, like any illness, is treated in many ways to bring relief, healing (not a cure), and aid such as

¹ Alyce McKenzie, "Lectionary Reflections", www.patheos.com

exercise, medication, and talk therapy. But there is something else which may help that study after study has proven effective in many cases. Often when we are depressed we find life in helping others. A young man was struggling with pain, loneliness, and feelings of despair from a recent death in the family and some other hardships in his life. Somehow, that young man was able to ease the pain, find a glimmer of happiness and life in going out, purchasing toys and gifts, and delivering them to children in a hospital. I believe this is part of what Jesus is hinting out here today. We often find meaning and healing when we turn outward and help our neighbor in need spreading the love of Christ and meeting the needs of the world.

Yet, there are indeed those times when we do need to focus on ourselves and our own well-being because, as we often read throughout the gospels, even Jesus makes time to get away, rest, and recharge. It's near impossible to serve others without filling our own cups with the gift of life we find in Jesus. In these moments of solitude, Jesus seeks the mercy and strength of the One who is the very source of life as we often find Him deep in prayer with God, His Father. Just as He so clings to the source of life, we to turn to God in midst of earthly suffering placing our trust and hope that only God can redeem us from the depths of despair, pain, brokenness, and death. A life in Christ is not one that glorifies death but in turn gives praise and thanksgiving to the new life that only God can deliver. God has the ability to transform those tragic, horrifying, sorrow filled, and ugly situations and moments of life into new life that proclaims the mystery and goodness of God and in return puts to death the power of sin and evil.

Elizabeth Johnson, in her commentary on this passage, states something along the lines that when Jesus states we are to take up our cross he is not talking about suffering that is

simply part of life in a broken world. Neither is he telling us to seek out suffering and martyrdom. Jesus himself did not seek it, but he did foresee that it would be the inevitable outcome of his mission. When Jesus speaks of losing our lives for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel; taking up our crosses means being willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences might be. It means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort and security. It means being willing to lose our lives by spending them for others – using our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others might experience God's love made known in Jesus Christ.ⁱ

It's not an easy thing because, like Peter, our instinct for self-survival fights us every step of the way. Yet we try, and we try, and we try again for the sake of the gospel. That amazing news the world needs to hear, which is the story of Jesus and his love for the world. Amen.

ⁱ Elizabeth Johnson, www.workingpreacher.com