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Mark 8:27-38

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. 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, 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 Way of the Cross

My friend Gretchen had the remarkable good fortune of landing the lead in a new, and much anticipated, Broadway musical just months after her college graduation. She had only been to a handful of auditions before being given this incredible opportunity. Gretchen felt very, very fortunate. She was certain her positive mental attitude, motivated by what she thought of as a spiritual commitment to succeed was what gave her the edge.

A few weeks into rehearsal, it became apparent that the producer was interested in much more than a business relationship with Gretchen. She refused him with as much grace as she could muster. Two days later an assistant director suggested she had better reconsider her situation if she expected to work in any future productions, let alone this one. *Didn't Gretchen know, he asked, how powerful this man was?* This producer could make or break her. Lots of young women would give their right arm for this opportunity, he assured her.

Gretchen told him she wouldn't put up with such harassment. And then, she added something that completely caught her off guard, something totally unplanned.... something that would change the way she thought about herself forever. In the heat of the moment she looked at the assistant director and said, “I won't - I'm a Christian!”

It was the last thing she expected to say. Gretchen told me later that she blushed a bright red and instantly regretted this slip of the tongue. Where had that come from, anyway? She was hardly some sort of pious type. In fact, she wasn't even sure what she really believed.

The word "Christian" had always described someone else, and probably someone she didn't particularly like. Certainly she had never claimed this identity as a matter of moral urgency. This is what Gretchen wondered about when, a week later, she was dropped from the production in favor of the attractive understudy.

The result of this "slip of the tongue" for Gretchen was both professional and spiritual. The professional part was easier, or as she said, less surprising. Of course she knew the world was full of jerks. She just had never had it quite so personally demonstrated. Though still upset, she felt she would survive. The spiritual part, what she referred to as "this Christian thing," was a bit more perplexing. She realized she needed to pay attention to her slip of the tongue. She thought it might mean she had staked a claim, chosen a path. This was her wake-up call: being a seeker and follower of the deep truth was a kind of calling, even for an actor, wasn't it?!? And, it was potentially pretty costly.

In thinking back on the experience, Gretchen tells me she still had regrets – the musical went on to great success. She was pretty confident that had she played her cards differently, it would have been her name in lights. Yet she was also certain that, if confronted with the same situation, she would make the same decision. It was a matter of her fundamental identity, her dignity and integrity.

Gretchen's decision put her down a new road. It was a road whose goal was true life, and it cost her something. For her to live with integrity was going to be rather demanding. Gretchen and I still talk about this today – how demanding it is to live a life that attempts to follow Christ and to faithfully engage "life as it is."

During my years in New York, I had conversations about life-as-it-is with a wide array of people: actors, singers, dancers, set designers, of course... but also entrepreneurs, bankers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, ministers, bartenders and doormen - the list goes on.

Here's what I heard and learned:

- a life well-lived,
- a life that day by day attempts to conform to the deep truth,
- to the deepest, most profound and life-giving wisdom,
- is in part about walking on the edge of life, the edge of faith.
- It is a demanding and sometimes costly proposition.

In New York, what I call my "growing up years," I discovered that the issues of dignity, integrity and love are the greatest virtues of human engagement. And that if you go through life without

consciously engaging these issues; then you are not living right. And, a church that doesn't engage these issues has squandered its highest calling.

But here's the thing about this message: it isn't naturally popular and it doesn't market well.

Our Scripture lesson this morning says, *"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. What does it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"*

Well, that's a very different kind of wisdom than we normally hear these days, isn't it? Because the truth is that the real task for us as people of faith is to get our lives synched up to God's call. That's why the church will often find its voice on the side of less popular causes, speaking a discomfiting prophetic word - speaking out against oppression and injustice. Matters of human dignity, integrity and mature love are what give our common life substance and meaning.

This morning, I invite you to focus on the cross.

- It is the symbol of eternal spiritual life that triumphs over physical death.
- But the symbol of the cross is paradoxical.
- It starts out as a dark and terrible human symbol of suffering...
- and yet God transforms it into the divine reminder that suffering and death are not the end, that they are overcome by undying love and holy light.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus predicts his own suffering and death. To our human ears, this sounds so negative, like a defeat that subtracts from life. Peter objected strongly to these words that his Messiah would suffer. What Jesus promises, however, is that through his love, the way of the cross would be positively transformed into God's ultimate "addition sign" leading to abundant life.

And then he invites us to pick up our cross. What he is saying is that when we deny the outside world, we become filled with God's selfless joy and abundant love.

Here's an example. I found online a piece of anonymous advice on how to be miserable: "Think about yourself. Talk about yourself. Use 'I' as often as possible. Mirror yourself continually in the opinion of others. Listen greedily to what people say about you. Expect to be appreciated. Be suspicious. Be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive a criticism. Trust nobody but yourself. Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything. Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors shown them. Never forget a service you have rendered. Shirk your duties if you can. Do as little as possible for others."¹ Yikes - that sounds like the opposite of faith, right?

¹ Anonymous, from *Daily Walk*, June 29, 1993

The great American evangelist, Dwight L. Moody once said "God sends no one away empty, except those who are full of themselves." And, on a lighter note, I'm sure you've heard that "the trouble with some self-made men is that they worship their creator." Which is a lot like the wife who claimed, "My husband and I have managed to be happy together for 20 years. I guess it's because we're both in love with the same man."

I know these are cute jokes, but I bet many of us can relate. We all know people like this. We may even see ourselves in some of this, because our culture is constantly promoting self-centered values. And it is against *this* backdrop of self-absorption that Jesus admonishes us: to deny ourselves, pick up our cross, and follow him on the way that leads to life.

You know, too often the way of the cross is considered puritanical and life-denying — but we who believe know that's just not true. Because we know The Truth. We believe in a loving God in whose image we were created. It's not life, or God's good creation that we are denying at all. Jesus very simply says "What do you profit if you gain the whole world and lose your soul?" My goodness - I read this text and am struck by how directly Jesus words speak to a culture that is so caught up in the restless pursuit of pleasure that our souls are possessed by our possessions, consumed by the very things we're consuming.

Do you want to be a more spiritually mature, happier and more positive person?

- Everything in life can be immeasurably enhanced by changing our focus;
- By lifting our eyes to the cross;
- By remembering that God is the author and giver of everything that is beautiful and good.

Jesus never promised us that life in this world would be easy, only that he would be with us in the Spirit, revealing his divine presence, his comfort, and his guidance in the midst of whatever life brings our way.

Ask yourself: What inner truth is so central to your life that nothing can shake it?

My friend Gretchen was not an extra holy or pious person. She was simply someone who knew who she was in Christ. And she knew that her life must be lived from that central truth.

I believe there is a deep and transcendent wisdom that dwells in the human heart, a hunger and a thirst for a God who is so much bigger than ourselves.

The aim of faith is transformation - to shift our focus.

- Gazing upon the cross of Jesus Christ empowers us
- to be lifted up,
- to rise above the negativity and the fear,
- in order to embrace the positive way of God's love through Jesus Christ.

And that's why we're here this morning. We're gathered here to embrace the way of Jesus Christ, a way that involves turning away from the negativity of the world, and going deeper into the sanctuary of our hearts.

In a few minutes, we are going to commission a group of young people who are serving at Salkehatchie next week. These amazing youth are happily giving up a week of summer vacation - relaxing, playing, sleeping in a comfortable bed in an air conditioned room... because they said "YES!" to the call of Christ. They are willing to pick up their cross - their hammers and their paintbrushes too, and to be a sign of God's Good News out in the world.

What might God be calling YOU to pick up this morning?

I'll close with these words from author Melody Beattie: "It's so easy to look around and notice what's wrong. It takes practice [and discipline] to see what's right. Many of us have lived around negativity for years. We've become skilled at labeling what's wrong with other people, our life, our work, our day, our relationships, our conduct, ourselves. We want to be realistic, and our goal is to identify and accept reality. Negative thinking empowers the problem. It takes us out of harmony. Negative energy sabotages and destroys. It has a powerful life of its own. But so does positive energy. Each day, we can ask what's right, what's good - about other people, our life, our work, our day, our relationships, our conduct, our selves! Positive energy heals, conducts love, and transforms. Choose the Good."²

My friends, choose the Good News. Choose the way of Jesus Christ. The cross is the ultimate symbol of God's gracious and loving heart. God's love, as revealed through Jesus Christ, is a positive, healing, victorious presence that transforms our life, and grants us a new and eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Melody Beattie, *The Language of Letting Go*, p. 72