

“Gospel Irony”
Mark 8:27-38
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The Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prayer: Holy God, in the quietness of these moments, startle us by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing your word we may better understand the good news of the Gospel and your will for our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It occurred to me the other day that throughout my ministry, I have preached some 700 sermons. And of those 700 attempts to communicate something of what God might be saying to us, and with the exceptions of Christmas and Easter, I’m almost certain that more of those sermons have had to do with this exchange between Jesus and his disciples than any other story in scripture.

Because this account appears not only in Mark, but also in Matthew and Luke. And throughout the course of a year, the Common Lectionary, which provides us with our texts each Sunday, presents this account multiple times. That may be why some preachers don’t like the lectionary and trust their own instincts when it comes to selecting texts. But its frequent appearance throughout the church year is a way, I think, of saying, “You’ve heard it before—now hear it again: This business about cross-bearing—about losing your life, goes right to the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.”

And just like we know what this text says, we also come expecting Peter’s reaction to the news that Jesus must suffer and die. It’s no longer shocking to hear that Peter doesn’t like it—that he’s not grasping something very fundamental. And when we hear it again, we’re not surprised when Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. Mark doesn’t go into the details of what was said but we can be certain that Jesus’ prediction of his suffering and death didn’t sit well with Peter, or fit his assumptions about how a strong, triumphant and victorious messiah would look.

But it did surprise Jesus who rebukes him right back. “Get behind me Satan,” he says, which he certainly didn’t learn in a Masters of Divinity class on pastoral care. “You have your mind set on human things and not divine things.”

And then once again those familiar words,

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 would lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Losing ones life....

That's so hard to hear because it goes against everything in our human nature—everything that our culture and society seeks and sells. Consider the great lengths we're willing to go, the costs we're willing to pay in order to preserve our lives or protect ourselves from unwanted, inconvenient and tiring demands.

But the bold claim Jesus was making in foretelling his own suffering and death is that his death would not be the end but a beginning. And so consider once again, as you've considered it before, the radical, life transforming message that in losing ourselves, our lives, we are actually finding them—we're saving them. That out of death will come new birth, and it will be a great awakening to a new and wonderful way of living and being. In losing ourselves—in dying to the self we experience salvation in the form of becoming more fully who God intends us to be.

There is in this exchange between Jesus and Peter, the distinction Jesus draws between earthly things and divine things—between heavenly thinking and human thinking. And because we're dealing with an irony here, I think it's a helpful distinction. Because earthly or human thinking is more temporal. It focuses on the things that pass away, whereas divine thinking isn't bound by any limitations, not even death. It isn't limited by what skeptics say or critics claim.

The divine things Jesus talked about are not the kinds of things that can be easily measured. But they are the things that live on and never end. They are the eternal truths like love and peace, kindness and forgiveness, hope and justice. Human thinking listens to fear and responds with rationalized force. Human thinking also believes its own wisdom and trusts its own ability. And human thinking fails to comprehend the true nature of power, which is one of the greatest ironies of all. Too often it listens to the loudest voices and is taken in by the most promising agendas.

Divine thinking, on the other hand, listens to the still small voice and is influenced by the tiniest acts of love and compassion—acts that to the world seem insignificant but which can nonetheless move mountains and cause the kingdoms of this world to totter and fall.

Most sadly of all, human thinking focuses on self-preservation and when it does that, it leads directly to ways that actually rob us of life itself. Divine thinking focuses on self-giving and the preservation of others.

And you see the results of human thinking all the time. You see it in the insecure wealthy person who worries needlessly about not having enough and who wants desperately to be even wealthier. You see it in the one who seeks their validation as a person—their significance and sense of self-worth in terms of what they do rather than in who they are as a child of God.

Sometimes we spend our lives trying to gain the whole world—scrambling around, filling our days and evenings with commitments and appointments, as if the busier we are the richer our lives will be. And yet, there have never been more people on anti-depressant

medications than there are right now. And then there are those who are spiritually hungry and searching and unsatisfied. I meet them all the time. “Have you heard of this? Tried that? Seen what that big praise barn church is doing? Read this book? Gone to that workshop?”

Listen, if you are someone whose life seems a bit empty and meaningless, and it has caused you wonder if your life matters, might I suggest that instead of reading another self-help book or further considering the power of positive thinking, maybe what you need to do instead is pick up a cross. Perhaps you need to be spending your life rather than trying to preserve it—giving it away instead of protecting it. Emptying it rather than filling it. And might I be so bold as to suggest, that unless you’ve picked up a cross of your own, you’re dying already and you don’t even know it.

The Apostle Paul referred to the cross as foolishness and a stumbling block in that it just doesn’t make sense to the world. But the good news of the Gospel is built upon the ultimate irony—namely that out of death comes life. That because God created the world, redeemed it in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and sustains it by the power of the Spirit—because of that, death does not have the final word, which changes everything we’ve been told about how the world works.

It means that what is traditionally thought of as the ultimate end, really isn’t...

That those who according to the world’s standards have it all, really don’t...

That those who think they’ve arrived and are in first place are really in last place while those who appear for now to be in last place are already the winners. And in a world ordered that way, it means that out of defeats and disappointments come victories never imagined. It means that the unclean are really pure, that untouchables are embraced and the weak are really the powerful.

It means more often than not that the rich in things are poor in soul, and that the world’s poor are rich in ways the rich can’t begin to comprehend. It means that sinners and saints are not distinguished between, and real pride is taken especially in the prodigals.

According to this Gospel of ours, outsiders are insiders, those who have been shamed discover new dignity, outcasts have the best seats at the banquet table, and that those who spend their lives believing otherwise—believing that none of this is true and who therefore spend their lives trying to preserve, protect and insulate themselves, are really killing themselves.

It’s both the Gospel irony and the Gospel truth.

In dying we live. In giving we receive. And in losing ourselves we’ll discover who we really are. Jesus asks each one of us to pick up a cross. Not his cross—he was capable of doing that himself. Rather, he wants you to pick up a cross of your own and to carry it.

These words are very familiar. We've heard them before. We'll hear them again. The question for each of us, however, is that the next time we hear this charge to pick up a cross, will we have done what Jesus has asked us to do? Or you might think of it this way, the next time you hear these words, will you be more fully alive than you are right now?

Amen.