

Will You Give Your Own Life?

We are in the gospel of Mark this morning, where we'll be journeying for most of the Sundays in the fall. One of the things people notice in Mark's version of the story is this repeated thing Jesus does where he says not to tell anyone about him. Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell anyone, we heard in today's scripture passage and there are plenty of other places like it.

From the blind man Jesus healed and then told him not to even go into the village where people would see the miracle...to the unclean spirits who shouted out, "You are the Son of God!" and were sternly ordered to not make him known...to Peter, James and John on the mountaintop right after today's passage where they witness Jesus' transfiguration and the vision of Moses and Elijah with him, who Jesus then orders to tell no one what they'd seen...over and over again, there is this sense in Mark of Jesus trying to guard some sort of secret.

Peter gives what seems to be the correct answer to Jesus' question, that famous question, "Who do you say I am?" Even if we were brand new to the story of Jesus, and we were reading just the gospel of Mark as our first introduction to who this Jesus guy was and what he was all about, we would have known from the very first verse of Mark that this was the story of the "good news of Jesus **Christ**, the Son of God."

So when Peter answers Jesus, saying, "You are **the** Christ" – which is actually a more accurate translation of Peter's words, Christ rather than Messiah – we should know this to be a "correct" answer.

But, of course, the only response we hear is that Jesus "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him:" You are the Messiah, the Christ. Don't say that to anyone.

Jesus does have a message to broad cast to the crowds, though. "He 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." Jesus doesn't just how his willingness to be identified with that statement publicly. It is the statement he believes is necessary to put out there with his name. Who does Jesus want the crowds and the people of Caesarea Philippi to say he is? He's that guy who told everyone they had to take up their cross.

It's no accident that he says this in Caesarea Philippi; no accident that it's the people of Caesarea Philippi he wants to overhear this message. Because Caesarea

Philippi was a focal point of the colonial powers in the region. To name something Caesarea, after all, is to name it after Caesar, after the emperor. And so, it is here, in a power seat of the empire, that Jesus tells people to take up a cross.

Which to be honest, is an image that has lost its power for most of us. Crucifixion was the punishment that the empire itself exacted on its most dangerous political dissidents and rabble rousers. As Theodore Jennings, a New Testament scholar writes, “The agony and humiliation of the death on the cross, inflicted, was meant to be a public example and an effective deterrent against those crimes which threatened the sway of the Empire.” He goes on to say, “What Mark is suggesting is that there is something about the mission of Jesus and the disciples that provokes the fury of the state security apparatus.

There is something about the gospel that provokes the most extreme reaction on the part of the guardians of the status quo. The cross of Calvary was not a difficult family situation, not a frustration of personal fulfillment, a crushing debt or a nagging in-law; it was the political logically- to- be- expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling Jesus’ society.’

So, here, in one of the seats of imperial power, Jesus is getting loud mouthed about he and his followers taking up the very instrument of the empire’s worst punishment. Take up your lethal injection drugs. Take up your drone strike target. Take up your solitary confinement cell in Guantanamo. Something along those lines would be the parallels we might need to hear for today.

Or maybe the most powerful and telling parallels for today would be even more subtle...how does our society take it out on those who fundamentally challenge the notion that capitalism is unquestionably good? How does our society punish those who dare to question the founding narrative of this question, the one that says it was built on the foundations of liberty rather than on the backs of slave labor and the tracts of stolen land?

Theologian Karl Barth said “One cannot try to be a martyr. One can only be ready to be made a martyr. Jesus doesn’t command us to go out there and crucify ourselves, but he does call and invite us to be ready, ready with the worst of what will undoubtedly be thrown at us.

Do you remember Bree Newsom? She is a filmmaker and activist who climbed the flag pole at the South Carolina state capitol to take down the Confederate flag on June 27th, 2015, ten days after the shootings at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston.

The core thing in Bree's preparation to take action, came when she squared herself up with the realization that, in fact, she might not come back down that flagpole alive. Once she realized and claimed for herself that reality, that doing what needed to be done was bigger than herself, and more important even than actually succeeding, then she was ready.

And up the flagpole as she went it was "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures." And on the way back down, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." It was an act of prayer the whole time.

Rachel Held Evens put it this way: "Our God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life, so if we want in on God's business, we better prepare to follow God to all the rock bottom, scorched earth, dead on arrival corners of the world – including those in our own hearts, because that's where God works, that's where God gardens. There's no ladder to holiness to climb, no self improvement plan to follow. It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt and our despair.

This text, invites us to consider the possibility that there are times we need to take radical actions – as individuals and communities – even when we are absolutely aware that it will result in harsh consequences. Following Jesus will come with significant losses. If we are going to challenge forces of destruction, they are going to challenge us back. Power does not give itself up for the sake of the good of all. Historically, there has never been an occasion where significant rights have been gained for any community because those in power felt compassion and wanted to right their wrongs.

It has always come after protest, loss and significant movement work. When we said "yes" to living a life devoted to Jesus, are we ready and willing to "lose?"

I am preaching to myself now. Until white people are willing to give up our worldly power, our concrete positions of leadership, our stolen resources, our egos, white supremacy will continue to reign. The more we hold onto as white people, the more we damage our own souls and continue to do harm to our siblings of color.

And for all of us, what are willing to truly lose for the sake of Christ and sexual orientation, gender or immigration status?

Think about the cross – not as place for our sin to reside – but as a symbol of the power of the empire. If we truly listen and follow Jesus’ words and “take up our cross”, we must in our own ways, be willing to navigate the world faithfully, knowing there are going to be consequences. We can’t do that unless we are honest about what we must “lose” in order to “gain”.

What is the good news we are willing to speak? Will we own it with our names, and more importantly, our lives? And will we let Christ own us, with all the claim on our lives, and hearts and allegiance that such good news demands? Amen