

A Frighteningly Hopeful Invitation

Mark 8: 27-38

February 25, 2024

The grandmother was sitting in the last row of the few who had gathered in the Carlisle United Methodist Church Family life center. No one knew her identity. At the end of the presentation about parenting she raised her hand to ask some questions and told the group she had just taken custody of her third grade grandson. She and her husband were two years away from retiring. Raising a grandson was not in the plan. This was not what they had expected.

The disciples in our gospel text this morning were not expecting Jesus to say what he tells them about his plan for ministry. They have arrived at Caesear Phillippi, a Hellenistic city at the very north end of Israel. Jesus asks the disciples who do people say that I am. They answer some say you are John the Baptist, others Elijah, and some say you are a great prophet. But when Jesus presses them more, Peter steps up and says you are the Messiah, where upon Jesus tells them to be quiet about it. Which seems odd because aren't we suppose to tell people who Jesus is?

The reason for him telling them to be quiet will soon be revealed. He's not who the disciples think he is. They don't understand so Jesus knows they still have some work to do around his identity. But we don't have to wait because it is about to be revealed and they and we may not be happy about the outcome.

First of all Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. This title was first introduced in chapter 2 of Mark. This is an apocalyptic figure from the book of Daniel who is to have

dominion over all the earth and kingship. But this Son of Man does not line up with the Messiah expectations of Peter and the early readers. They believe that Jesus as the Messiah is to overthrow the Romans and return governing to a king of Israel. But Jesus tells him he will be questioned by the scribes and authorities, he will be crucified, killed and will be raised after three days.

Peter raises a stink about this and rebukes Jesus who in turn rebukes him and tells him he has his mind not on divine things but earthly things. This is not what Peter signed up for. Just like Grandma sitting in the back row who now has custody of her third grade grandson. Peter signed up for the glory and the crown, not the cross. Every disciple and then the people when Jesus addresses them know what is meant by the cross. It's a method to maintain control by those in power. It's meant to intimidate. When you walk by a person dieing on a cross it's a reminder of who is in control. It's a way to keep folks in line through fear.

We've seen the power of this type of control in our own US history. Patty and I visited the lynching tree memorial in Montgomery, Alabama this past fall. It is a humbling and powerful experience to walk among the names of African-Americans who were lynched by whites in order to maintain the Jim Crow laws in the South. Between 1865 and 1950 there were 6500 lynchings. Placing people on a cross or hanging someone from a tree produces fear and power and gets the message across that those in power will take your life and let you hang for everyone to see. You will be put in your place.

An example of a victim – Calvin Mike voted legally in 1884 (fifteen years after the 15 Amendment giving AA the right to vote.) A white mob attacked and burned his house and then lynched his mother and two daughters. Intimidation. Would you vote next time?

Jesus turns to the crowd that's gathered and says if you want to be my disciple you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you must lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it. It's one of the great paradoxes in the scripture. Peter and the disciples are totally confused. This is not why they dropped their nets to follow Jesus. And the disciples in the book of Mark have a hard time throughout the gospel understanding Jesus. We too face the same challenge.

It is interesting that Mark places this in chapter eight, right in the middle of the gospel. There are only 16 chapters. Not only here but in chapters 9 and 10 Jesus repeats this message. It must be important. We have a cross in just about every church sanctuary. Our crosses are empty. It is popular with the wealthy to display a cross with diamonds. Gene Lowry wrote if you place a cross in the middle of a group of upwardly mobile people they will turn it into a ladder of success. If you've bought into the idea that it is God's plan that you become famous as an athlete or an actress that God has a plan for you. It's all about the glory and it is for Peter.

But the cross is about suffering. The cross makes you ask what's God's plan for the Palestinians? What's God's great plan for the refugees at our border? What's God's great plan for the victims of Ukraine? Up until chapter 8 Jesus has healed people, he has fed 4000 and 5000, he has raised Jarius's daughter, he's healed a leper, and he has taught some great parables so one can see how following Jesus is a good thing but then he drops the cross in the

middle of it all. Jesus is more concerned about our mission to not be so self centered. We are to be other centered. Seek the suffering in the world and there is where we are to focus our ministry. It's about being Christ in the world. Here's an example of how ministry can be daunting when thinking about the other:

You are all aware of the governor of Texas sending bus loads of immigrants to Chicago and New York. But our governor wants to send the National Guard to the border. If we are to be Christ's followers by taking up the cross and by denying ourselves, we should be asking the Texas governor to send busses of immigrants to Iowa. There's the suffering. This is what Jesus is asking us to do. I bring this up as an example of what Jesus is asking Peter and the disciples to do, which is why his teaching is so hard and why Peter rebukes him.

I was an interim for 20 months at the Carlisle UMC and just ended it last June. They have a mentoring program there that is over 20 years old. The director has been doing it for the whole time. She gets an average of 30 members to mentor kids in the elementary school. Visit the student one hour a week for the whole year. Some of these children and their parents have a hard time making ends meet. Right after COVID, with the rise in gas prices, there was more suffering. So the director and I decided to have house meetings for the parents of the kids who church members mentored.

I had met the manager at Fareway there and he had told me Fareway was going to drop a program where certain families who qualified could get a reduction on the price of meat but the store was going to drop that program. This is what motivated us to bring these families together.

We met at the church with these families and asked questions like what keeps you awake at night? and what pressures are you facing as families? There were three things that came to the surface – what to do about cell phones and social media, rising gas prices and rising grocery prices. So we decided to have a social worker come and talk to the parents. We advertized all over town and contacted the parents of the kid who were mentored by the United Methodists to come to this. We were really disappointed by the turnout we had only ten show up. In our western world and North American thinking this was a failure.

We asked Gladys Alvarez, who is a social worker at Orchard Place and is a good United Methodist, the president of Women United. She told the parents that night about ACE, adverse childhood experiences. These would be abuse, sexual abuse, abandonment, death, divorce, a tornado all the traumas kids can experience. Gladys says the antidote to these experiences is love and support. If the child doesn't get the love and support, the trauma will follow them and impact in a negative way their lives.

Grandma was sitting in the back row. She told me later that the boy had been abandoned by one parent and the other parent had recently died. Two ACES for the boy. The one person who needed to be there that night was there. The grandmother heard Gladys tell her love and support would help the child. The grandmother and grandfather literally entered into the suffering of this child. If you want to save your life, you must lose it. You must become other oriented. That does not mean we become door mats for people, but it does mean we become caring people.

The grandmother and her grandson started coming to church. The boy started attending the Wednesday evening SS classes. He was withdrawn. It was hard to get a squeak out of him, but he kept coming. In May when the Wednesday evening program ended they took the kids to get ice cream. I showed up also and the boy came up to me and asked me how I was doing. He approached me. This kid had changed quite a bit. He told me he was doing well in school and thanked the church for offering the Wednesday evening program.

Jesus tells us in the gospel of John that the greatest commandment is that we love one another. 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.