

Questions, Questions

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March 1, 2015 (Lent 2B) – 8:30am service
Mark 8.31-38

It's been 25 years since I was a graduate MBA student. There are lots of things from that course of study I don't remember, and any number that I'd just as soon forget! But one thing I do remember, and it continues to resonate with me – and that is the notion that to lead effectively, you don't have to know all the answers; you just need to know how to ask the right questions. So when we needed to choose a school for our young children when on an international assignment 16 years ago, we chose a school that practiced inquiry-based learning.

It's a good practice for looking at Scripture texts, too. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon writes that "The questions we ask of the texts we read are as important as the answers we are led to." In the case of today's Gospel lesson from Mark, the lectionary drops us right in the middle of a scene that begins with its own question a few verses earlier, when Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus then asks Peter, "Who do **you** say that I am?" Peter has a ready answer: "You are the Messiah." You can almost see Peter fawning over Jesus as if he were a rock star or the pope or the Messiah, even!

Then to Peter's shock and dismay, Jesus foreshadows not a triumphant reign, but his tortured walk through Holy Week, stumbling and groaning through the suffering and the violence of the cross. It's no wonder Peter angrily rebuked him. What kind of Messiah capitulates to the Roman Empire?

And if that weren't enough, Jesus declares that "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Furthermore, he says, if you want to save your life you must lose it."

And that scene – the scene of today's text - the scene that introduces the cross and its costly implications for the first time, is the paradoxical turning point of Mark's story that claims to be "the **good news** of Jesus Christ." With a nod to Mr. Spock, it's "illogical." So the question is, "How is this good news? How is this good news for the first century world? How is this good news for the 21st century world? Even, how is this good news for us?"

It is a legitimate question, for texts like this have been tragically misused to keep people in abusive situations, or to glorify suffering as its own end. Perhaps you've heard someone say, "I guess this is the cross she has to bear, poor thing." It's not uncommon; and it's not good theology. In fact, it's harmful and completely contrary to how Jesus responds to injustice. There is nothing redemptive in suffering for suffering's sake. As Beverly Zink-Sawyer writes, "When Jesus calls us to take up the cross, he is not calling us to be 'door mats for Jesus.'"¹

On the other hand, in his book "The Cross and the Lynching Tree," James Cone points out that through much of Christian history we've detached the cross from any reference to ongoing human suffering and oppression. "The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that Christians wear around their necks," he challenges. "Rather than

¹ <http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=50>

reminding us of the 'cost of discipleship,' it has become a form of 'cheap grace, an easy way to salvation that doesn't force us to confront the power of Christ's message and mission."²

So what do I do with my collection of crosses I showed the gathering this past Wednesday at our Living Waters Wednesday service? My collection includes four pendants - a small silver one, one with three crosses – like the three on Calvary, one that has the cross surrounded by new growth and beautifully symbolizes death and resurrection, and then a larger one with curving, almost feminine lines that I wore every Sunday with my robe and stole at the church I previously served. I also have a gold cross pin. I have a stained glass one that says "Amazing Grace." Another is cloisonné. Then there's the one made of hammered metal, with some beads and a noisy cowbell attached. And finally, I have one made of olivewood from Palestine. So what do I do with these? They're all beautiful and meaningful in their own way – they remind me of who gave them to me, and for what occasion (which in almost every case was my ordination to ministry). But is that enough?

For in the Roman Empire, a cross was not only an instrument of death, it was an instrument of terror. James Cone likens the cross on Golgotha to the public spectacle of a lynching tree, designed to humiliate and terrify; the point wasn't so much the "death of the offender," but "getting the attention of those watching." It was "first and foremost...addressed to an audience"- perhaps not unlike the propaganda value of extremists executing Egyptian Coptic Christians in Syria.

So what do we do with these beautiful, yet tragic symbols that we wear around our necks and that grace our sanctuaries? Somehow I don't think the answer is to toss them aside. Maybe our best hope is to stop treating them like good china that gets used only for special occasions. Maybe our best hope is to wear them and contemplate them not just in the holy season of Lent, but every day of our life. Maybe our best hope is to use them as a window into the depth and breadth of God's love made known to us in Jesus Christ, and into Christ's call to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

OK - let me just put it out there – the potential implications of this are, shall we say, uncomfortable. At our discussion on this Scripture at Thursday Voices three days ago, one of the participants reminded us of something Martin Luther King Jr. said in 1963, in the more patriarchal language of that time: "If a man (or more inclusively, a person) has not discovered something he will die for, he's not fit to live."

It's just been a few weeks since the confirmation of the death of Kayla Mueller, the 26-year-old kidnapped American aid worker who'd worked with Syrian refugees. A recent Presbyterian News Service article mourned her death and detailed some of what motivated her. Gregory Allen-Pickett, general manager of Presbyterian World Mission met her working on a water project in Guatemala back in 2009 (which if I do my math correctly, means she was only 20 years old at the time). He said, "Kayla stood out to me as particularly thoughtful and articulate. She was processing the poverty she had been exposed to and the systemic issues related to it. Her questions and comments showed a deeper level of commitment and thought regarding the issues that surrounded her on the trip. It was impressive for someone of that age."

The news article also shared her own description of her work with Syrian refugees back in 2013. She said, "For as long as I live, I will not let this suffering be normal, something we just accept."

² *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xiv-xv.

And then later she said to her family, “I find God in the suffering eyes reflected in mine. If this is how you [God] are revealed to me, this is how I will forever seek you.”³

I think that’s one picture of what Jesus had in mind when he said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

The truth is, however, that we resist that demanding call to discipleship. Walter Brueggemann calls it governing our lives by “Yes, but...We do not want to turn loose. We do not want to relinquish. All our “Yes, buts” are designed to keep control, so that we are not placed in jeopardy...Our long series of “yes, buts” are designed to resist the Gospel, not only its costs, but its terrible surprises.”⁴

The costs? Suffering, and for some, even death. The surprises? God choosing human relationships – relationships with humanity and for humanity; with us and for us. If we think about it, that surprise runs smack into the way our culture idealizes individualism (which, I would argue, is our present-day American heresy.) That’s what Karoline Lewis suggests denying ourselves might mean for us – that we give up our solitary, individualistic, autonomous self – deny the self that “rescinds relationship,” deny the self that “refuses community,” deny the self that “rejects intimacy,” deny the self that “thinks it can survive on its own.” For the Biblical worldview, as I understand it, is that people aren’t full and complete humans by themselves, apart from their relationships to one another. There is no “I” apart from “we.”

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

As I said before, in the first century Roman Empire, cross-bearing was a common, very public sight. Maybe that can help us think about what it means for us to take up our cross – to join God’s world-transforming work in a public way. Beverly Zink-Sawyer frames the question for us: “As we encounter what might feel like “crosses to bear,” we can ask the question “Is my sacrifice and suffering furthering the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ?” To answer “Yes” to that question is to begin to understand the earth-shattering, boundary-breaking, kingdom-provoking meaning of Jesus’ work and our part in it.”

I see abundant examples of this kind of sacrifice – in addition to the Kayla Muellers of the world. I see the person who makes a difference in the lives of people not just because it builds a good resumé or earns admiration, but because it’s in response to a deep sense of calling, a deep sense of ministry in Jesus’ name – the person who serves as a paramedic; the one who teaches special education; the one who works with at-risk youth; the one who sits with those who are dying; the one who gives up a lucrative opportunity to serve the world.

Even and especially what we do here in this radical act of worship – with the cross before us – is part of this sacrifice. “Whenever the message of the cross of Christ is rightly preached and heard,” Daniel Migliore writes, “whenever people of faith gather at the Lord’s table to celebrate life in Jesus Christ and its promise of a new creation, whenever forgiveness is offered in the name of Christ and received in the power of the Spirit, the deadly circle of violence and counter-violence is broken, and the rule of violence begins to yield to a new world of compassion and solidarity.”⁵

³ <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/2/20/kayla-mueller-remembered/>

⁴ Collected Sermons of Walter Bruggemann, 12.

⁵ *Faith Seeking Understanding*.

The question for us becomes, "Can we be this good news in our own context? Can we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus past our own streets of complacency. Can we follow Jesus? For one thing is certain: Jesus **is** on the move. Amen.