

Truth Telling
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Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church, Crofton, MD
February 25, 2018, Second Sunday of Lent
Mark 8:31-38

That well-known TV psychologist, Dr. Phil McGraw (you all know him, right??) was once asked who he would most like to interview. “That’s easy,” answered Dr. Phil quickly. “Jesus Christ! That would be my first choice” My colleague upon hearing about Dr. Phil’s answer just rolled his eyes, and said, “I doubt it, Dr. Phil. I don’t think you really want to interview Jesus Christ. It might not go the way you think.”

My colleague had a point. What would it be like to have the tables turned in an interview, to lose control and realize we are speaking with someone who knows us better than we know ourselves, someone who doesn’t hesitate to question perceptions and motivations, someone who is transparent, honest, focused to the core and into truth telling at all costs?

Take the Jesus we have in this morning scripture from Mark’s Gospel. Peter tried to be Jesus’s public relations’ manager and control him. Who was closer to Jesus than Peter, and yet, Jesus is calling Peter “Satan” and telling him to get behind him. That’s some hard truth telling. But Peter was far from getting things right and Jesus would not hesitate to set him straight no matter the public relations cost.

You see, Peter thought that the title “Messiah” would exclude suffering and focus on royal triumph and restoring Israel’s power as a mighty nation in the world. That’s what the people wanted to hear. But Jesus is teaching that he must suffer and be rejected.¹

“Hey, Jesus! Get over here. Can I see you for a moment?” says Peter. “Could you take it down a few notches? You’re impacting our funding and poll numbers. People don’t want to hear about suffering. That’s not going to help recruitment.”

The truth teller makes it clear to Peter. “You are not on the side of God here, Peter. You are not on the side of God’s intentions, Peter. You are focused on earthly things and measurements that have little meaning to God. Get out of my way.”

Since Jesus brings it up, let’s address suffering for a moment because Jesus talks about it a lot. The disciples could not understand what could possibly be the purpose of the Messiah having to suffer. Let me be clear that God does not delight in suffering, and as part of God’s work we are called to alleviate suffering and bring healing and compassion. So, if God doesn’t delight in it and asks us to lighten these loads, then why doesn’t God just eliminate suffering especially for the long-awaited Messiah?

I am going to pass the buck here and tell you to come to Prince of Peace during Lent for the Lenten Study. I attended this past Thursday and learned that the subject was the “light hearted” topic of theodicy. (I am kidding. It’s not light hearted.)

¹ New Interpreter’s Bible, Pheme Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark.” Abingdon Press, Nashville: 1995. pp 625-628.

Theodicy is an area of theology that asks the hard question, “If God is all present, all knowing and all powerful then how come a shooter can walk into a school and kill 17 people? Why doesn’t God stop it? How come God doesn’t stop that tsunami wave before it destroys a village? Is God really all-powerful? Does God allow suffering and if so, why?”

Now, I wasn’t surprised at this topic because Elizabeth McLean is your pastor, but my thought was that this is a congregation that keeps each other on their toes and deals with the hard questions of faith that have no easy answers. We can’t possibly have gone through the events of these past two weeks and not thought about the world’s suffering. And in this season of Lent as we head towards the Easter celebration, we must remember that to get to Easter we have to walk through Good Friday. This past Thursday, they set up 15 chairs and they were all filled. So join us on Thursdays and have them have set up 30 chairs and make more soup.

As Jesus refuses to acknowledge Peter’s rebuke, Jesus sees a teachable moment.

What does it mean to be a follower of the one who will suffer and be rejected? This is not going to be a private conversation between Jesus and the disciples. There are many of those in scripture. But for this lesson, we are all called into the room.

Jesus gives three requirements for disciples. Three things, that’s all. We can do three things, can’t we?

Number one: **Deny yourselves!**

As the Rev. Karoline Lewis states, “Wait a minute! This goes against an incarnational theology that we all matter to God. Can’t I come just as I am?” Yes, you can, but after being with God, you might not leave the way you came.²

This verse has been misused to keep marginalized people in their place by those more powerful; women, people of color, the poor. Many have proof-texted saying, “Don’t you know the Bible says you have to deny yourselves, lose your life in order to save your life?”

I pastored people who were from a culture where no matter how accomplished the women were in their education or their entrepreneurship or their abilities to organize and manage, the benchmark for their worthiness was whether they had given birth to a child. Their culture told them that they would need to lose those other aspects in order to fulfill their womanhood. This passage was quoted. Is this what Jesus meant when he said, “Deny yourself”? No!

In the words of Dr. David Loose, Jesus is not implying a doormat theology that ignores our basic human needs, the importance of self-care or causes us to see ourselves as undeserving of love, dignity or respect. There is no justification whatsoever in this passage for enduring abusive relationships or tolerating injustices.³

² The Rev. Karoline Lewis Blog “Craft of Preaching” February 22, 2015.

³ David Loose “The Theory of Everything”

So what self are we supposed to deny?

We have 5,000 images popping up on our screens every day telling us who we should be, what kind of body we should have, what's important, what we should strive for, how to be powerful, and what our priorities need to be to make all these things happen. Jesus' first disciples did not have 5,000 images popping up on their smart phones and yet even they thought the secret to life was power and strength.

That's not who we are! What self are we to deny?

Rev. James Atwood who served churches in this area for many years was born and raised in North Carolina and to this day loves the sport of hunting. But Jim is one of the most dedicated gun control advocates I have ever known. He writes in his book, "America and Its Guns," **that we are to deny the self that willfully destroys the image of God in us and in others. Nothing is more sacred or true than a human being created in the image of God.**⁴

We are human beings created in the Image of God, the Imago Dei. Theology professor, Dr. Dan Migliore explains the Imago Dei.

Being truly human means living in response to the grace of God, coming out of isolation to be in relationship with God and each other, not just those we choose to be in our circle, but all God's children. The Imago Dei is not an individualistic existence, but communal. It's also not static. It's a movement throughout our whole life. We are constantly trying to learn and live into our true selves as human beings created in the image of God.⁵

As Saint Augustine said, "Lord, you have made us toward yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Back in 2006, the movie "Blood Diamonds" about the Sierra Leone Civil War from 1991-2002 told of a young boy taken from his family and made into a soldier and trained that his purpose in life was to kill. His father, Solomon Vandy finds his son, Dia. Dia is pointing his gun ready to kill his own father. Solomon says,

"What are you doing, Dia? Dia, look at me! You are Dia Vandy of the Mende tribe. You have done terrible things, but it's not who you are. You are a good boy who loves soccer and school and has a mother and a sister waiting for you. The cows wait for you and the wild dog, Babu, minds no one but you. I am your father and you will come home with me and be my son again for that is who you are."

Deny the self that willfully destroys the image of God in us and in others.

So, the second requirement for discipleship is to **take up our cross.**

⁴ James Atwood. "America and Its Guns" Cascade Books, 2012.

⁵ Daniel Migliore. "Faith Seeking Understanding." Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan: 2004, 139.

For Christians, that image conjures up Jesus' journey to Golgotha bearing his cross on his shoulders. But for the listeners in Jesus' day, "taking up the cross would have conjured up horrific images of crucifixion, an execution practice all too common in the Roman empire. Crucifixion was primarily carried out on the marginalized, those who had no rights, those who were oppressed by the state, those who were considered abominations, those who rebelled against the injustices imposed by the powers of the empire. The condemned would literally carry their cross, naked across the city, and this was to serve as a deterrent at going against the empire. It was uttermost shame and humiliation. Support the powers that be no matter what or this is what will happen to you.⁶

So, Jesus' message was to resist the fear and the threats and carry your cross, pursue God's intentions and God's will whatever the cost. Jesus was not about power and triumph. Jesus was about confronting everything that is not aligned with God's purposes. That's what we are to be about also.

Each and every time we make ourselves vulnerable to the needs of others, to the affirmation that all are created in God's image, each time we seek out what is right and good according to God, we come alive, we experience the glory of God made manifest. It's not passive. It comes when we take up our cross and follow Jesus. As Jesus' disciple, what cross are you bearing for the sake of the Gospel?

A few years ago, the Ava DuVerney movie, "Selma" was about those who picked up the cross for civil rights. Now we know that in this march, in this movement there was confrontation. There was sacrifice. There was suffering. Isn't it interesting that the theme song by John Legend for this movie was entitled "Glory?" They were bearing their cross for justice and in doing so experiencing the glory of God.⁷

I don't know all the religions that were represented, but this week as I watched and listened to those teenagers from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, I could see many crosses willingly picked up and carried.

The third requirement that Jesus teaches is to **be loyal to Jesus**, to be committed, to speak out and not be ashamed. This is not easy as evidenced by Peter who said, "I will never deny you, Lord. How can question my loyalty?" Then he denied Jesus three times. Or the rich man who knew every commandment by heart but loved his money more or Judas who took a few coins and led the authorities directly to Jesus.

The Greek word used in this text is very helpful. It is "phroneis." It is understood as making a strong commitment and then holding that conviction. There is no middle ground. Once the commitment is made, one works constantly to hold the conviction to that commitment. We can't be a follower of Jesus only when it's convenient for us.⁸

⁶ Pheme Perkins. New Interpreter's Bible. "The Gospel of Mark"

⁷ David Loose

⁸ Ched Meyers. "The Binding of the Strong Man." Orbis, Maryknoll, NY:2002, pp 246-248.

Billy Graham died this week. I grew up with his crusades and maybe some of you did as well. As I matured in my faith, I had my theological differences with him. He didn't always get it right. Nor do I. But, I believe that he was an example for me of being unashamed of Jesus, committed to sharing the love of Jesus to a broken world, and devoted to making someone other than himself known.

I am not Billy Graham and will never preach the Gospel at crusades in front of thousands of people. But as the preacher Fred Craddock once put it, this week will probably not have us christening a ship, composing a symphony, ending a war, or meeting with the queen.⁹ But this week might have us offering a cup of water, filling a bag of food, helping a child read, planning a march, meeting with one of our delegates or senators, welcoming a stranger, speaking out for truth when it might not be the popular viewpoint.

This week, this very day will give us the opportunity to deny any self, other than the one created in God's image. It will give us an opportunity to carry our cross. We will get the opportunity in word and in deed to be unashamed of Jesus and show our conviction. For, we are followers and that's the truth of who we are!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

⁹ Fred Craddock, Interpretation Series, Luke: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching John Knox Press, Louisville.