



“The Cross Isn’t the End”

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Mark 8:27-38

When I was growing up I loved listening to the comedian Yakov Smirnoff. Do you remember him? I remember him saying that when he first came to the United States from Russia he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He said, “On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk. You just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice. You just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, what a country!”

The past several weeks we have talked a lot about baptism and last week we witnessed the baptism of Behnoush Ghodsi. We have emphasized how remembering our baptisms gives us strength, informs us, and helps us through these grueling Lenten days. It’s almost as if we could simply add water and then everything will be ok. But that’s when we read our Gospel lesson for today. You see, Jesus throws us for a loop and begins talking about the cross and suffering and being rejected and dying. Just adding water isn’t going to fix this. At the end of Lent we don’t get a baptism, we get a cross, and Peter and the rest of the disciples were not ready for it.

You see, the disciples were in the midst of playing “follow the leader” when Jesus suddenly turns a corner and leads them straight into a way of suffering and the denying of self. The disciples were stunned and surprised, not sure if this was where they wanted to go. Following Jesus into the waters of baptism was one thing, but following Jesus to the cross was something else altogether. Jesus knew that we wouldn’t be able to follow him into his sacrificial work in the world unless we too focus on the cross, take up our crosses, and do the hard work of denying self. That’s what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah.

But the disciples had a different understanding of what a Messiah was. They were filled with such hope and expectation for the journey ahead. Jesus had just fed a crowd of thousands of people with seven loaves of bread and a few fish. He put the powerful Pharisees in their place when they tried to confront him and put a stop to his miraculous work. He healed a blind man, not once but twice, so that now the blind man saw clearly. So, when Jesus asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” the disciples had the boldness to compare him to the great prophets new and old, John the Baptist and Elijah. And then Peter dared to say that Jesus was the greatest prophet ever sent by God, that he was the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus, of course, didn’t deny the truth of what Peter said, but with that confession, Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone of this revelation.

And the reason no one was to be told that Jesus was the Christ was because this Messiah was different from Peter’s understanding of what a Messiah should be. Jesus taught the disciples about what this true Messiah must face: betrayal, denial, suffering, death, and finally, and most mysteriously, resurrection. So, the “following the leader” thing, this being a disciple thing, had

way more at stake than just healing people and casting out demons. The cross was Jesus's fate and it was the disciples' fate as well.

And so, suddenly this wonderful and passionate and life-changing role of being a follower of Jesus was altered. Peter would no longer be able to overthrow Rome. Peter would no longer be able to fish for people and add to this prophetic army. The whole plan had changed. And Peter didn't like it. And do you blame him? Jesus's message had taken a darker turn. It wasn't simply follow me and we will change the world. It was follow me and deny yourself and take up your cross. Follow me and suffer. Follow me and struggle under the weight of burden and pain.

That was clearly a message Peter didn't want to hear and it's a message we don't want to hear. We seem to think that following Christ makes everything better. We seem to think that the money will start flowing in, that relationships will be fixed, or that our health will improve and we will be healed. We, like Peter, want to pull Jesus aside and say, "Why is this happening to me? What is wrong with this world? Why are our children killed while getting an education? Why do we treat people who are different than us with such hate and scorn? Why did the doctor give me such bad news? How is this all a part of your plan, Jesus?"

We are just as frustrated today with Jesus as the disciples were in the first century. The idea that the coming Messiah would deliver the Jews from Roman oppression was prevalent, and Galilee was the epicenter of that revolutionary activity. Jesus had already set free those who were imprisoned, healed those who were sick, called all those who would follow, and challenged all of the oppressive religious laws. This Jesus was already building an army to challenge the political and religious structures. But then Jesus decided to tell his followers what the true Son of God would do, about carrying a cross and dying. None of the disciples expected a suffering and dying Messiah.

And Peter and the disciples stopped listening before Jesus could get to the part that he would rise again in three days. It appears that this most important element, resurrection, went unnoticed. At the mention of suffering, rejection, and death, all listening ceased. They couldn't bear any more bad news. Peter was blinded by his own preconceptions of what a Messiah should be and how the kingdom of God should be. He had a plan for the Messiah which wasn't in the Messiah's plan. He had a plan for Jesus's life which wasn't the life Jesus had planned. And we tend to act just like Peter, don't we? We often think we know what needs to be done and how our lives are supposed to go. We often get blinded by our prejudices, preconceptions, and presuppositions about the way things must be, and no one, not even someone rising from the dead, could convince us otherwise.

So, Peter the rock became hard-headed and rebuked Jesus. He gave Jesus a piece of his mind. He told Jesus what he had planned and how he would make things happen. And Jesus listened to him. But like we experienced last week when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, Jesus knew that Satan was out there to change the course of his salvific work. Jesus knew that the evil in the world would try to keep him from carrying the heavy burden of the cross and to be a different kind of Messiah. The wrong kind of Messiah.

And don't we often act and think like Peter? Don't we think that we know what power and victory should look like? Hulitt Gloer, a professor at Truett Seminary, understands that humans think that: "The way to victory is the way of power and might, the might that makes all things right and results in a glorious kingdom. Just look at human history. Just look at our own lives. But for Jesus and any who would be his followers, there is another way."

The other way we are called to ponder during Lent is the way of rejection. The other way we are called to live is to deny self. The other way we called to face is the cross. It is before us; the shadow is long and it is dark. It is often all we can focus on. And for the disciples, the cross was the end of the story. But, if we will listen to Jesus, we will realize that the cross isn't the end. Jesus whispers into our souls if we will only listen that after three days he will rise again. There is life at the end of Lent. There is hope at the end of your trials. There is peace at the end of war. There is love at the end of hate. There is resurrection at the end of the cross.

The cross isn't the end. Carrying our cross means we will hurt. Carrying our cross means we will struggle with sin. Carrying our cross means we will bear the burden and the weight of the wood and feel the pain of the nails. But the cross isn't the end. We know that there will be an empty tomb. The cross isn't the end. We know that in the morning, the angels will appear. The cross isn't the end. We know that life will spring forth from the agony of loss. The cross isn't the end. It's just not. No matter what you are lifting, carrying, holding... no matter what plagues you, burdens you, bothers you. No matter what consumes your thoughts and drains your energy, the cross isn't the end!

Author James Richard Lahman tells the story of a young woman he met by the name of Ann. Ann was a bright and articulate physician, 30 something, from Australia. She had grown up in a working-class Catholic family – not poor but they certainly did not consider themselves rich, as her father had to work two jobs to put food on the table. Her parents were able to give her one year of college, but after that she was on her own to finance the rest of her education.

Upon finishing medical school, she could easily have made a decision to make a fairly decent living for herself. Instead, she joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, a French order of about thirty thousand members. She was working in the West African country of Gambia. Every morning when she went to the clinic she would discover ten to twelve women who had given birth during the night. Since the clinic had only eight beds, sometimes new mothers would have to rest together on one bed. In some instances, new mothers even had to lay on the floor, for there was no other place for them, even at two to a bed.

Lahman continued his story: "That young physician told me that each day after leaving the maternity ward she would treat two hundred children who had malaria. In that remote area, this was the only medical facility. Ann was the only physician. Her staff consisted of some native nurses. Her lab contained only a microscope. She had only one drug to treat all of the various stages of malaria. I asked her 'why?' Why had she given up the prestige, the privilege, the money and the power of a 'regular physician' among ordinary people? Why had she become a nun after she was already a physician? Sister Ann smiled and said: 'After medical school, I began to look at all the sadness, pain and suffering in the world. Once I started contemplating all of the brokenness that needed healing, I knew that, if I was ever going to be adequate to do my

share of the healing work, I would first of all need to be a whole person myself. I needed a strength from beyond myself. I also knew that I would need the support of a caring and loving community of faith.”

Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus believed that suffering for the sake of others mattered. Jesus believed that taking our sin and pain to the cross mattered. He experienced the cross to be with those who were suffering, not to make them feel better, but to help them not feel alone. And so, in Lent and in life, Jesus reminds us that the cross isn’t the end. We are not alone. Jesus has gone before us, and the church goes with us, and there is resurrection and life waiting for us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.