

Mark chapter 8, verses 31-38:

³¹Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Becoming Bodily Involved

What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus? Although we hope this is a question with which each of us wrestles on a regular basis, during Lent liturgically speaking at least, it is a question we can not avoid. This is the heart of Lent, what does it mean to follow Jesus?

Today is the second Sunday of Lent. When we come to church these Sundays before Holy Week we are choosing to step along side Jesus’ first disciples and follow Jesus as he journeys to the cross. These weeks we listen in on what Jesus told his followers about what it means to be a disciple and we work to make sense ourselves, *in this day, in this place*, of just why Jesus did what he did and what difference this journey of his means in our lives and our world.

We have an advantage of course, over the first disciples. We know about Easter morning. But our Easter lenses only serve to sharpen our vision of this call Jesus makes to his first disciples and to us. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Today, when we pick up the story, things are taking a dramatic turn. Last Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, according to the lectionary or suggested readings for the day, the story focused on Jesus and the testing and temptation he went through as he prepared for the life that was coming for him. The story of the temptations of Christ is the traditional scripture reading for the beginning of the lenten season.

This week we skip ahead in Mark's telling of the story. The disciples have been with him now for some time. They have witnessed miracles and listened to teaching. It appears that maybe they are beginning to 'get it'. In the verses immediately preceding what we read this morning Jesus asks his disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?' and Peter responds, 'You are the Messiah.'

Now if Jesus had just given Peter a thumbs up at this point and said, 'Yes, you've got it,' and continued on with his preaching and teaching, we, I hope at least, would all be very different people right now. We generally do a fair job following clear, easy answers. But that is not what Jesus did. Jesus, as the story continues, 'then began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected and killed and rise again.' Jesus begins to teach them about the cross.

Theologians call this point in the Gospel of Mark the, 'crucial hinge' in both Mark's story and our own lives of faith.¹ For it is right here that the story turns and what ever Peter and the rest of us might think or wish that a Messiah should be is gone. And when Peter tries to bring it back, keep this story the way he thinks it is suppose to go, and takes Jesus takes aside and rebukes Jesus for what he has said, Jesus comes down hard, "Get behind me, Satan." This is *not* your story. This is *God's* story.

And then Jesus turns to the crowd, making sure that everyone hears and says, "If any one wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For 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." (Mark 8:34,35)

This is what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word*, Year B. Vol. 2, pg. 68.

Many, many sermons have been preached on these verses. It is one of those passages that requires regular reflection and prayer in the constantly changing contexts of our personal lives and our lives as citizens of the world. What does it mean for you to deny yourself? What is your cross, today? And what is not? What does it mean for you to save your life as you are losing it?

An individual suffering from injustice, whether behind the closed doors at home, or out in the world, must hear these verses differently than ones who are inflicting pain. One who has just lost her job and is wondering how she will keep a roof over her children's head must hear these verses differently than one who has choices about how she will spend her time and money. Self denial and cross bearing require close walks with God.

But in all cases the words of Jesus call all of us to a radical trust, not in ourselves and our own abilities, but in God. They call us to lose ourselves in the love that God offers to all people. To risk loving enough, caring enough that it might hurt. Sometimes the risks we take will mean physical suffering for us. Always they will mean taking chances with who we are and what we have.

I read some commentary that brought the two readings that are our texts for this morning together. that helped me look at this idea of discipleship in ways I had not before. The commentary was written by Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and writer who's work I have appreciated for years.

Our Old Testament text from Genesis that George read is the account of God's third enunciation of the covenant with Abram. Abram was 75 when he first heard God's call and he set out to Canaan with his wife, Sarai and his nephew Lot. (Gen. 12) Abram was 86 when God renewed the covenant. Ishmael, Abram's child by Sarai's servant Hagar, was conceived and it seemed that Ishmael was to be the heir to God's promise. (Gen. 15)

Now, at the age of 99 Abram hears God repeat the promise of a son a third time, 24 long years since Abram first heard God's call. This time God re-affirms that it will be Sarai who bears the child of this promise. Along the way on this *long* life story of Abram and Sarai, recounted in Genesis, we see that the two of them are deeply flawed - very human - yet they remain faithful to God's promise. With no evidence that they will ever be parents of a single child, much less parents of a nation, they have continued in relationship with God and one another.² As an aside, Brown Taylor writes of Abram and Sarai here: "Their trust is unconditional. In years to

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word*, Year B. Vol. 2, pg. 52.

come, three distinct religions will spring from this trust, claiming Abraham as their grandfather in faith. Their grandmothers will be different, but not their covenant with God. God will be their God, and they will be God's people."³

As we read this story today, with our focus on what it means to be faithful to God, and in our case, Jesus Christ, this story bears a powerful message. Here God's call to Abram and Sarai takes on new dimension. This time, Abram and Sarai receive not only divine renewal of their covenant with God, but also new names: Abraham, or father of a multitude, and Sarah, which means princess. Now Sarah's participation is no longer assumed or implied, but explicit and Abraham's whole identity becomes that of one who will be the father of many.

At this point Brown Taylor points out something I found very powerful about this story. As you can see from the reading in your bulletin, there is a piece of this story left out of our lectionary: verses between 8 and 14. These verses recount God's instruction to Abraham that, as a sign of the covenant, 'every male among you shall be circumcised'. Brown Taylor writes of this, "One can only guess why these verses have been left out of the lectionary. Perhaps the subject matter was deemed too explicit for public worship? Whatever the reason, the omission deprives hearers of imagining Abraham's response to this new development in the covenant. His faithfulness will now require more of him than simply answer to his new name. He is about to become bodily involved."⁴ Sarah too is bodily involved as she will bear a child.

This was the 'Aha' moment for me this week. This is precisely what Jesus is saying to the crowd gathered around him. On this second Sunday of Lent, when we gather with the crowd around Jesus and hear him say, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For 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," this is what he is saying to us as well. To be a faithful disciple of Jesus you will be bodily involved.

Not just words or thoughts but all of you, and this will mean suffering sometimes. Discipleship means trust in God and commitment of all that we are.

We are fortunate. We do know that the cross and the suffering is not the end of this story, that God too is bodily involved in this covenant, this relationship with us,

³ Ibid, pg. 53.

⁴ Ibid, pg. 55.

through the person of Jesus Christ. So when Jesus calls us to follow, to risk, we are never alone on the journey. And that makes all the difference.

That is why we can keep asking the question, what does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus? And we can keep risking an answer, with our love and our lives.

How is it that each of us is answering this question today? What is it meaning for you, today to be a faithful disciple of Jesus?