

Sunday February 25th, 2018

Lent II

PRAYER: We Glory in your holy name, O God; we marvel at your wondrous works. You gathered a nation around you and called it blessed. You spared not your own Son, but sent him in the midst of a people to redeem them from sin. We gather this day to bear witness to your majesty. Our hearts rejoice in the promise of your covenant of love; our souls are cleansed by your mercy. Our bodies rise to bless your name; our voices sing your praises.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God of compassion and mercy, look with favour upon us as we confess our sins. Our faith is weak in the face of crisis. Our hope collapses when we are threatened or maligned. We seek our own safety and abandon those you love. We trust in objects we can create and control. We speak much and risk little. But you, O God, have given your promise that you will never forsake us. Forgive our failure to take you at your word. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: God's promises rest on grace and guaranteed to all who believe in Christ. As the scriptures tell us, "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations." And also we read, "It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." Trust the promise of grace, and accept the righteousness of God bestowed in Christ.

STEWARDSHIP: God is the source of all goodness, so what can we give that has not already been given to us? Surely no gift of ours can repay Christ's gift of love. Therefore, we offer ourselves, with thanksgiving for new life in the Spirit, and place before God what we have in response to his love. May God use us in ways that fulfill his plan for creation, and bless what we give, so that others may learn of his ways.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

O God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, with deep humility we recall today your covenant with our ancestors. The very same covenant which formed the basis for the work and ministry of your prophets like Jeremiah. And as with the people of Judah, during Jeremiah's time, we see how despite full knowledge of your covenant, faith can waver-doubts can raise its presence-yet despite it all you have always remained faithful. No matter how many times your people have broken covenant with you, you always keep covenant with them. As it was with these people form long ago, so it is with us today. The covenant is alive and well, not because of us but because of you. So, we thank you, dear Lord, for judging us not as you should but rather out of your mercy. We thank you for dealing with us not on the basis of our goodness but yours; and for coming to us not because you need us but because we need you. We praise your name for not forsaking us, but for stooping to us in our depths and lifting us to your heights.

Yet our gratitude mingles with guilt. We bow in shame before the treachery of our ancestors. Then we pause to examine ourselves, and we are more ashamed than ever. For even with their mistakes plainly before us, we repeat them as if they had never been made. Even with their confessions clearly before us, we shelve them as if they had never been uttered.

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But in the end, we learn, as they learned that from your presence there is no hiding place; and that the hound of heaven will never stop pursuing us until we stop running from ourselves.

For this folly, O God, we beg forgiveness. The breach between us is wide, but it is our making and not yours. We are the transgressors, but we are not proud of our transgressions.

We are especially sorry for duplicating the mistakes of our ancestors. Enable us now, O God, to put the sinful past behind us, theirs and ours, that we might embrace the hopeful future with confidence.

Raise our vision beyond our daily routine to the distant horizons of your sovereign rule. Let us no longer walk through the world as self-centered dreamers. Grant us the sensitivity of our Lord that we too might be moved from complacency to action. And let our action, like his; be rendered with an eye only to your will for the human family and without regard for personal risk to ourselves.

As we consider the summons of Jesus to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow him, let us remember this simple truth: for us as it was for him, cross bearing is a way of living before becoming a way of dying.

BENEDICTION: The journey of Jesus took him into a world of suffering, rejection, and death. As we go into this same world, embolden us, O God, that we too might take up our cross and follow you. Teach us to ask not that you shield us from temptation, but that you keep us from evil in temptation's midst. Amen.

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Mark 8:31-38

“No One Likes Bad News”

I hope you enjoy this little story as much as I do. It concerns a bagpipe player from Newfoundland or as they say on the Big Rock, a Newfie Piper. The story is told in the first person, so these are the piper’s words...

As a young piper, I was asked by a funeral director to play at a grave-side service for a homeless man, with no family or friends. The funeral was to be held at a cemetery way back in the country, and this man would be the first to be laid to rest there. As I was not familiar with the backwoods area, I became lost; and being a typical man did not stop for directions. I finally arrived an hour late.

I saw the backhoe and the crew, who were eating lunch, but the hearse was nowhere in sight. I apologized to the workers for my tardiness, and stepped to the side of the open grave, where I saw the vault lid already in place. I assured the workers I would not hold them up for too long, but this was the proper thing to do. The workers gathered around, still eating their lunch. I played out my heart and soul.

As I played the workers began to weep. I played, and played, like I’d never played before, from “My Home and The Lord is my Shepherd to Flowers of the Forest”. I closed the lengthy session with “Amazing Grace”, and walked to my car. As I was opening the door and taking off my coat, I overheard one of the workers saying to another, “Lardy, Lardy, boy, I never seen nothin’ like that before and I’ve been putting in septic tanks for twenty years.”

You don’t have to be a Newfie Piper to find yourself making embarrassing assumptions. How often do we walk into a certain situation, examine the observable information before us like: who is there, what we think they are doing, and immediately our brains fill in the holes. Making assumptions is behind all kinds of problems that plague mankind. Stereotypes of certain cultures, religions, skin colour or ethnicity are based almost exclusively on assumptions.

I happen to have experienced the sting of stereotyping: not because of my age, or that I am a white male or that I am Canadian; but because I am a Baptist minister. Thanks to television preachers, the historical experience some people have had with my predecessors, or because of what a friend of a friend has said about Baptist preachers, I meet people all the time who expect me to be a certain way.

It reminds me of the cute little incident that occurred on a bus where a lady leaned over to her seat mate and asked, “Are you a preacher?” To which the man replied, “No Madam, I’ve just been sick for a few days.” One of the greatest compliments I ever receive, is when I am getting to know people, and enjoying their company, and then observing their responses when they learn I am a Baptist preacher.

How wonderful to be so atypical in their minds that they don’t believe I am a preacher.

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Assumptions! We all make assumptions. We make them all the time, much to our embarrassment and most frequently, our assumptions come from our ignorance. Our gospel lesson today is all about assumptions, and it comes in the middle of a whole section of Mark that deals with assumptions. The passage read today occurs immediately after Jesus inquires of his disciples as to who the public says he is. In other words, what are the rumours?

The response from the disciples was that some people thought Jesus to be John the Baptist, others thought him Elijah and others thought him one of the other prophets. The public had been watching and listening to Jesus, and they were trying very hard to make sense of him by filling in the gaps in their understanding. No matter how much information the crowds obtained about Jesus and his ministry, they still had more questions than answers in trying to get an accurate picture.

But what about the disciples; they, after all, had been the ones closest to Jesus, and heard and saw things the crowds were not privileged to observe. Who do they say Jesus is? Peter speaks, at least for himself, but I believe he is sharing a consensus, "You are the Messiah." Way to go Peter; the Holy Spirit has revealed a great truth to you. However, this revelation of Jesus being the Messiah opens a whole new truck load of assumptions.

The greatest of these assumptions has to do with the nature of being the Messiah. Peter, and the other disciples, may have determined that Jesus was the Messiah; but they certainly did not understand what was entailed in this. We know from other places in the scriptures, that the disciples, and others, saw Jesus' coming to humankind as: political, or military in nature, and full of earthly glory.

Time, and time again, the twelve struggled to understand Jesus' aversion to: seeking attention, and performing miracles on demand, or his resistance to calling for an all-out military strike against Rome. Instead of picking up a sword, Jesus picked up little children. Instead of demanding personal glory, he washed his disciple's feet. Instead of explaining a path to being served, he explained how we must be the one's serving.

No wonder these disciples were so often confused. We like to look at their experience and think, "Gee, how could they be so dense?" However, let us not forget we are looking back at their experience. "Hindsight is always 20/20", we like to say. I am almost certain that if we had been one of the twelve, we would have been just as confused, and maybe we are still confused to this day about the nature of Jesus being Messiah.

All this unsettling confusion about the nature of Jesus, and then we walk head long into today's passage, and we are shaken to the core. Not only are many of our assumptions about Jesus wrong, but then he states that being the Messiah will ultimately lead to his suffering and death. The destiny of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, is to be tried, humiliated, and crucified in Jerusalem. According to Jesus, the Messiah must suffer to accomplish his mission.

The way of the Messiah is the way of the cross, and to follow him, is to follow him to the cross. The suffering nature of discipleship is at the very heart of Mark's gospel.

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Unless, we understand that in following Jesus we are walking straight into the way of the cross, we are just as dense as the disciples. The suffering nature of Jesus' mission, and the suffering nature of being his followers, was not something the disciples wanted to hear. I used to have a dear friend, and neighbour, in the condo building where we lived in Scarborough, whose little grandson was quite a precocious little boy.

One day she was babysitting this preschooler grandson, when she wanted to get him to do something. The little boy was very annoyed, and with a great scowl on his face, and a raised hand with the palm towards his grandmother said in his broken English, "No talk a me!" After hearing the story, whenever I met her, I would tease her about something she said with, "No talk a me!" Well, whenever Jesus mentions his impending death, the disciples are just as determined not to hear it as that little boy. "No talk a me, Jesus"

This whole idea of a suffering Messiah, went against every assumption they had about the Messiah, and about what following him would mean for them personally. Every time Jesus predicts his suffering and death, the disciples fail to grasp it, and in some cases even try to reject it outright.

In our passage today, Peter tries to rebuke Jesus for even suggesting such a thing. In Chapter 9:32ff, the disciples did not understand, and were afraid to seek clarification when Jesus predicts his death, and instead went on to argue about who was the greatest among them. In Chapter 10:35-41, we read that again in the face of Jesus' predicted death, James and John change the subject, and instead ask Jesus for places on honour when his kingdom comes.

On each and every occasion where Jesus talks about his impending suffering and death, he calls the twelve to authentic discipleship that involves: humility, service, and suffering. And at every occasion of sharing about his death the twelve shout out, "No talk a me!" Like the twelve, we might think that such talk of the suffering nature of the Messiah, and in turn discipleship, is optional. We too might want to talk Jesus out of it. Verse 31, however, reads that the "Son of Man, would suffer many terrible things."

Actually, the word "would" isn't entirely accurate. The literal translation of that word is better render "must". Jesus must suffer and die. It is also critical to understand that Jesus' discussion of his impending death and suffering was not metaphorical. Verse 32 states that Jesus "talked about this openly with his disciples". In other words, Jesus was clear, precise, and blunt in his words.

But there is more to come. In verse 34 Jesus calls his disciples, and the crowd, over to him to listen. The introduction of the crowd is significant. The conditions for following him are not just for the disciples, but are relevant for all people. The call to selflessness, and cross bearing, is not just for church leaders, but for all believers. Those that follow Jesus, no matter who they are, are not to be simple observers of Christ's passion.

Instead we are to grow in faith, understanding, and to participate in Christ's suffering. Only when we follow the way of the cross will we ever understand Jesus.

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“Jesus is stipulating that those who wish to follow him, must be prepared to shift the center of gravity in their lives from concern for self, to reckless abandon to the will of God.”(William Lane) We are to say no to self, and yes to God. This demand of Jesus is reinforced by his image of what we might call a “death march”; a death march that we are all on. “Bearing the cross” was not a Jewish metaphor in common usage in Jesus’ day.

Nor was the cross some sort of idiom. Instead, to his audience, the suggestion of picking up a cross, and intentionally marching to one’s death would have sounded vulgar. Crucifixions were so common during Jesus’ day, that the crowd had no trouble picturing this image, it was just not a picture they wanted in their minds. This is especially true when the picture is intended to reflect back on the listener themselves.

The words of Jesus raise a picture in the mind of a condemned person being forced to carry the instrument of his own execution on his back. The image is a sober reminder that if we commit to following Jesus there is no turning back, and if necessary it means a willingness to go to the cross. In other words, Christ’s followers must be willing to die. Not even our valuable lives are to have any allegiance above God in Christ.

Jesus is fully aware of the frailty of life, especially a life threatened by death, but he warns that anyone who seeks preservation of their own life, at the expense of loyalty to Jesus, brings on an even greater danger. Jesus goes on to use the language of commerce to drive the point home. He talks about: profit, gain, loss and exchange. His point is that when you do commerce, you must find common value to do business.

The easiest way to think about this is with currency exchange. For people to buy or sell items with another country, they must have currency values that are representative of each other. For example: one Canadian dollar might be worth 78 cents in American currency. Jesus’ point though, is that you cannot find anything in your earthly life to compare to the eternal value he is offering.

The Psalmist wrote, “They trust in their wealth and boast of great riches. Yet they cannot redeem themselves from death by paying a ransom to God. Redemption does not come so easily, for no one can ever pay enough to live forever and never see the grave.” (Ps. 49:6-9)

It is utter foolishness to think that by securing one’s own life here on earth, one can assure their salvation that is provided by God. Verse 38 reveals that almost all denial of Christ is based on a shame born out of anxiety for one’s life, and the refusal to be an object of contempt for those who ridicule Christ and his followers. In other words, we value our comfort, social status, and even our own physical safety above loyalty to Christ.

Many years ago, the evangelist J. Edwin Orr was speaking at a university. During the question and answer period following his lecture, a young woman stood and asked, “Isn’t enough just to believe in Jesus? Isn’t that what Christianity is all about, simply believing?”

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Do. Orr answered with a question of his own, "Do you believe in marriage?" "Yes," the woman replied quickly. "Why do you believe in marriage?" asked Dr. Orr. "Because it creates a stable relationship that provides security for the partners, and it's a good arrangement in which to raise children. It helps bolster the stability of society," was her answer. "Good," said Dr. Orr. "I'm a minister of the gospel, so allow me to pronounce you married!"

The young woman laughed and said, "But I haven't yet found a man who will give himself to me and to whom I can give myself. I haven't got a partner with whom I can make a life." "Exactly," said Dr. Orr. "It's not enough to believe in marriage. You have to make a commitment and you have to live out your promise to care for your partner and do all the things that love requires."

Making a lifelong commitment to live for Christ is at the very core of being a Christian. Simply believing the truth of the gospel, as important as that is, just isn't enough. (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p. 40-Tony Campolo)

Maybe it is time for us to loosen our tight grip on our lives, and begin to let the eternal nature of Christ's promises begin to make a difference in our lives. Do you want to find true life? You won't find it by gaining the whole world, and sacrificing your soul. You will only find it by taking up your cross and making the journey to Calvary, slowly dying to self as you go.