

Sunday September 15th, 2024

Mark:27-38
“No Talka a Me!”

ALERT!!! Extreme groaner warning.

Tim was a fan of tractors all his life. When he was young, he had a tractor bed spread, toys and posters. He would tell all his friends at school of the latest tractor models being made and loved them more than anything. The years went by and eventually Tim was old enough to drive a tractor and so for his birthday his parents took him down to the tractor factory to test the latest model. Tim was told all about the amazing technology that went into the machine and then as he was almost bursting with excitement, he got to drive one for the first time.

However, the amazing technology was not quite what Tim had imagined and a horrific mechanical fault left Tim nearly dead and horribly injured. Tim then became disillusioned and hated tractors. He had loved them so much, but they turned out to not be the wonderful machines he had dreamed of.

Years later again Tim was in a sauna at a spa. He thought he spied a nice-looking lady across the room and wanted to talk to her but could barely see from all the steam. Tim then stood up, sucked in all the steam, went outside and blew it all out. He went back in and sat next to the lady. "Wow, that was incredible" she said, "How did you do that?" "Easy" said Tim, "I'm an ex-tractor fan"

I am never sure whether people care about sermon titles, but I hope you caught today's. The story behind it still makes me chuckle. Years ago, when Laura and I lived in a condo building in Scarborough, I met a lovely older lady named Pauline. One evening she was relating a cute story to those who were present about her three-year-old grandson. Pauline had been babysitting him and it was time to get the grandson to either go to bed or do something he didn't want to.

With all the bravado and bluster a three-year-old can muster he turned to his grandmother put up his hand palm out towards her and shouted, "No Talka Me!" It's a phrase that has stuck with me and I have been known to use it in jest, to some of you kind folk. I must admit that many times in most days I watch the news, see a Facebook post or read a newspaper and I want to shout, "No Talka Me!" In other words, I don't want to hear it.

I've recently begun wondering if one of the primary things that unites us as a society today might not be disillusionment. It seems to be everywhere, and on all sides. Now we may not agree on what we are disillusioned about, but I think it's a common disease from which we are all suffering. There is disillusionment with our leaders and the political system, with economic opportunities, with endless wars and violence, with prejudice and oppression, with religion and the church.

I suspect disillusionment is, in large part, what helps some politicians get elected and that is certainly true for President Trump. And President Trump continues in this current campaign to continue to fuel disillusionment to keep his followers loyal. I suspect disillusionment is also what energizes those who disagree with and oppose President Trump.

Behind the vitriol of recent political ads lies disillusionment.

Disillusionment is what drives the Me-Too Movement. It's why people festoon their cars or trucks with vulgar bumper stickers about our Prime Minister. It's why we are heartbroken and angry over the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church or famous fashion moguls like Nygaard. I read disillusionment in Facebook posts. I hear it in conversations and accusations. I recognize it in the decline of church attendance and influence.

And every one of us could tell a story about our personal disillusion, the disillusion that is unique and particular to our life and life's circumstances. Haven't you had times of disillusionment, times when you recognized that your life or the world wasn't what you thought it was, and may never be?

Disillusion happens when the story we've told ourselves, the story on which we based our lives and beliefs, the story to which we committed ourselves, no longer makes sense, is no longer relevant, no longer works, or is no longer true. Disillusionment is an in between time, a time when we have lost faith in the old familiar story but have not yet embraced another story. It leaves us panicked and fearful about the future. The world feels like a dangerous and chaotic place, out of control. And somebody needs to do something.

Does any of that sound familiar? Do you understand what I am talking about? Do you not want to muster up your courage and shout at the world, "No Talka Me"!?

What is your disillusionment today? What exactly is eating away at you and stealing your joy? Disillusionment, however, and this is critically important, isn't only about what's going on around us. It begins within us. Ultimately, disillusionment is a spiritual issue. And it's one the Apostle Peter knows well. In today's gospel (Mark 8:27-38) he is the picture of disillusionment.

He's confessed Jesus as the Messiah. He has a particular story about who the Messiah is and what the Messiah should do and be about. Who doesn't? Jesus, however, is about to undo and rewrite Peter's story. "The Son of Man," he says, "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." So much for Peter's understanding of the Messiah.

That's neither what he expected nor what he wanted. So, he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, as if he knows more and better than Jesus. In Matthew's version of this story, we hear what Peter says to Jesus. "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Mt. 16:22). Can you see and hear Peter's disillusionment? Peter confesses and Peter rebukes, all with the same tongue in the same conversation. He's speaking with a forked tongue, or as a friend of mine says, out of both sides of his mouth. It's what James is describing in today's epistle (James 3:1-12).

Listen to the disillusionment in your own life or in the life of another and you'll likely hear blessing and cursing coming from the same mouth. "With" the tongue, James says, "we bless the Lord and Father, and we curse those who are made in the likeness of God."

The forked tongue is a symptom of division within us.

The division we see out there is a projection of the division within us. It reveals our panicked disillusionment. And it reveals our arrogance. Often panicked disillusionment comes with the arrogance that we know exactly where things are headed and what should be done. Peter's confession and rebuke have become his disillusionment and arrogance.

"My brothers and sisters," James continues, "this ought not to be so." We know that, right. James states the obvious, "This ought not to be so." Our disillusionment is not an excuse to curse or rebuke another. It's not a basis for claiming we know more and better than another. And it is not a reason to declare or treat the other as less than us when that other has been created and loved by the same God who created and loves us.

The arrogance of panicked disillusionment can quickly lead to self-assertion. We can see that in Peter and his rebuke of Jesus. I'm not saying that as a criticism or judgment of Peter but in recognition of and identification with times of my own disillusion, arrogance, and self-assertion.

Jesus has no time for or interest in Peter's arrogant self-assertion. "Get behind me, Satan," he says. Those are the same words Jesus spoke during his temptations in the wilderness. Jesus hears Peter's rebuke as a temptation to be less than who he is and as a distraction from the work he is about. Maybe that's true for Peter, and for you and me. Disillusion tempts us to be less than who we truly are, tempts us to be arrogant and self-assertive, tempts us to lose sight of what we are about.

I came across an unusual fictitious story created by John Lawrence in his book "Down to Earth". The story goes that it was advertised that the devil was going to put up for sale all his tools of trade. On the date of the sale the tools were placed out for public inspection (much like a garage sale) with each piece having a sale price attached. It was a treacherous lot of implements. The usual tools were there. Hatred. Jealousy. Doubt. Lying. Pride, and so on.

Laid apart from the rest of the pile was a harmless-looking tool, well worn and very highly priced. "What is the name of the tool?" one customer asked. "Oh," said the adversary, "that's discouragement." "Why is it priced so high?"

"Because it is more useful to me than the others. I can pry open and get inside a person's heart with that one, when I cannot get near him with other tools. Now once I get inside, I can make him do what I choose. It's a badly worn tool, because I use it on almost everyone since few people know it belongs to me." Disillusionment can be out undoing, as individuals and as a community. (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p. 164)

In our disillusionment we often put our story in front of God's story, give more credence to what we see than what God sees, and take our story to be more real than God's story. Isn't that what Peter has done? Isn't that what's going on in the conflicts we have with another, in the times we assert ourselves and negate another, in our words and actions of violence? In our panicked arrogance we can easily and quickly betray ourselves, each other, and God.

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Despite what the prophets of doom say or what we feel, the world is not coming to an end, falling apart, or going to hell in a handbasket. It wasn't for Peter and it's not for us. The truth is we don't understand what is happening and we feel lost, scared, angry, and confused. The old story of power and self assertion no longer fits. It never did, but we heard that story and told it to ourselves enough times that we began to believe and invest in it. We need to embrace a different story. Jesus gives Peter and us a new story. He is the new story.

It's a story of self-denial. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." It's not just a story that Jesus tells. It's the story he lives and if any want to become his followers it must become their story. What would self-denial look like in your life this next week? I am not talking about self-denial as passivity, self-negation, a denial of our needs or desires.

It's not suffering for the sake of suffering as if that is inherently holy or redemptive. Let's not forget that the first half of Mark's account of the gospel describes Jesus' healing and relieving suffering, and oppression. And self-denial is more than just giving up a particular behavior, though that's sometimes not a bad thing.

What if self-denial is about separating from that which we often use to define ourselves and each other; political parties, national identity, economic status, family of origin, even religion? What if it is about redefining ourselves, our priorities, and our beliefs to be more in line with those of Jesus? What if self-denial is the key to loving our neighbor, our enemy, God, and even ourselves?

Maybe self-denial is what makes space and place for another and recognizes her or his life as important and sacred as ours. Maybe self-denial is, paradoxically, what allows us to come alive. Maybe it means re-examining our beliefs and attitudes about who we are, who another is, and who God is. And, finally, maybe self-denial means we don't take ourselves more seriously than we take God.

Self-denial might just be the medicine for our disillusionment.