

Sermon

Feb. 25, 2018

Based on Mark 8:31-38

“Where Does It Hurt?”

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I don't know about you but I've been a bit moody lately. I know I'm not the only one. A few days ago I was having dinner with a group of friends. One of them was talking about how grumpy everyone was at work that day. But she said to herself, “I have life group tonight!” She was looking forward to getting together for dinner at Cap City Diner with her friends. I was too. It was good, uplifting, to be with a group of friends, to laugh, to talk about what's going on in our lives, just be together, when you are feeling moody.

Maybe it's the weather. These several days of rain is like a wet blanket on our spirits. Or maybe it's been the emotion of the past few weeks, what happened in Westerville, and in Parkland, Florida, that has people feeling a little moody. Maybe you're feeling fine and care free. But a lot of people are feeling some stress, even a little anxiety. The shadow of suffering is creeping over the land and we are looking for relief.

And that's what makes the scripture passage this morning hard for me to talk about. There's no relief found in this passage. Instead, it's Jesus making the first of three predictions about what life has in store for him, persecution, misunderstanding, rejection, beating, crucifixion, and resurrection. Resurrection sounds great, but none of the other stuff. It would be nice to go straight to resurrection and bypass all the suffering. But that's not how it works. Rather than avoid the suffering, Jesus is moving right into it and bids his followers to do the same. We want relief from suffering, but that's not what Jesus offers. And that's why it is hard to talk about this passage in this season when for many of us the shadow of suffering lurks.

I very much sympathize with Peter. They had been waiting for a savior who God would send to make everything right, to restore Israel to its proper place of glory and power, to put Rome in its place, to bring

back the glory days. Jesus is that messiah. Peter and the rest are in on it. They are Jesus' posse, positioned to be a part of the restoration of Israel. But then Jesus starts saying things that don't match with what Peter had in mind how things were supposed to play out.

If Jesus is the messiah, he's the one who should be persecuting those who are not being faithful to God's ways. Why should he be the one being persecuted? If Jesus is the messiah, he is the one who should be rejecting the false and corrupt leaders. Why should he be the one rejected? If Jesus is the messiah, he should be overseeing the punishment of the oppressors and the lifting up of the oppressed. Why should he be the one who is beaten and crucified, to suffer at the hands of the oppressor he was sent to take out? How is it that the liberator is to achieve the work of liberation by being crushed by the oppressor? Sure, Jesus talked about coming back to life after three days, defeating the power of death. I wished he said more about what happens after he comes back to life. But he doesn't. He says a lot about what happens before his resurrection and that's what Peter finds so disturbing. It's disturbing enough for Peter to take the initiative to pull Jesus aside and tell the messiah that he shouldn't be talking like that. It's making Peter uncomfortable and a little confused.

Jesus is not sympathetic to Peter's sensitivity. You feeling uncomfortable and confused? Too bad. Get behind me! You are either going to follow me or you can walk. You have your mind on human things instead of divine things. You're thinking that my work as messiah is going to play out like humans have always done it, exchanging one oppressor for another, to the victor goes the spoils, rule or be ruled, to be king of the hill you have to pull down the person at the top of the hill first. That's how humans think but that's not how God thinks. God's power is not one of domination but of love, justice, liberation, compassion, and never, never walking away and abandoning anyone, an intense and unshakable solidarity. That's how God thinks and that's not how Peter was thinking. So Jesus tells Peter he needs to get his thinking straight.

But it doesn't get any easier when Jesus calls the disciples together, along with the rest of the crowd that happened to be standing

around at the time, and he tells them what being his follower means. To be a follower of Jesus, to live your life guided by divine thinking rather than human thinking, then you're going to have to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus' way of suffering, persecution, rejection, death, and resurrection to new life. The way of Jesus is not a way that bypasses suffering but instead walks right through it. Who wants that?

This, for me, is why this passage is hard to talk about right now. In a time when there is already a lot of suffering in the world, when we all could do with a lot less suffering, how do you apply this teaching about bearing your cross in times like these? Rather than being relieved from suffering and death Jesus calls us to follow by walking with him toward suffering and death. It's a difficult teaching to talk about.

I'm not even sure where to begin to unpack this teaching and connect it with our daily lives. And I don't know how far to take this. What I want to talk about barely scratches the surface of the call to follow Jesus from suffering, to death, to resurrection life. This is deep work, hard work, life-long work. And each of us comes at it from different places. Some of us are farther along in this than others of us. So, I guess what I'm trying to say is, what I'm going to say is inadequate to the task at hand and may not fully connect with you and your relationship with Jesus. But, I guess that's true for all my sermons. So I invite you to stick with me and see if any of this resonates with your own experience.

Let me start by setting our minds at ease. When we consider our discipleship, this is not about our salvation. We are saved by grace through faith. We don't earn our salvation. We don't have to make the grade as a disciple of Jesus Christ in order to be saved. If you were to believe in your heart that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the grave you will be saved. That's the simple gospel message, the message that Billy Graham proclaimed in a myriad of different ways before millions of people over several decades. Salvation and discipleship are two different things. The criminal on the cross who asked Jesus to remember him when he entered into his kingdom was told by Jesus that that very day he would enter into paradise. Christ has died for our sins.

We are forgiven. If we believe this then our salvation is made effective. That is the great news of God's grace.

But what does it mean to be saved? What are we saved from? We are saved from bondage to the powers of sin and death. We believe that Jesus has broken those chains. And although we continue to fall short, and although we remain mortal and will experience physical death, we claim that in Christ these powers do not have the final word, that there is something else, that we can live our lives more free from sin, and that we will live forever with God, although our physical life will end. So this is what salvation is about. But is there more? Is the reality of salvation only something we experience after we die?

See, we are meant to live free from the powers of sin and death in this life. It's not something reserved for life on the other side of the grave. We can live in freedom now. We can live a full and abundant life now. We can experience a taste of resurrection life now. Even now, we can be made new. What does that mean? How do we do that?

When I was a kid, I was on the receiving end of a lot of bullying. I was an easy target. From maybe around third grade until about half way through high school I was bullied by someone. And it hurt. Being bullied hurts. No one wants to be bullied. I still feel a little tightness in my chest when I encounter bullying or learn of someone who was bullied. How do you get free from that if you have experienced the bullying? What if you were the one who was doing the bullying? To get released from the bondage of bullying, it is necessary to get in touch with where it hurts. Where does it hurt? I wonder how many people who engage in bullying behavior have experienced abuse in their own lives and they are striking out at others rather than work through the suffering. I wonder how many people who have been bullied strike into themselves rather than work through the suffering. To get free from the bondage of bullying and experience a kind of resurrection into new life, can you come alongside someone who loves you, who asks you the question, "where does it hurt?"

I don't remember what network it is, but for several years now you can watch a program that's about intervention. In each episode, one or two people and their families are followed around and interviewed. In

each family there is at least one person is addicted to some kind of substance, either alcohol or narcotics. In every episode you hear about pain, how the addicted person is trying to numb their pain, deep pain they have experienced somewhere in their family history. At the same time, the rest of the family talks about their own pain, the pain inflicted on them by the addict along with the dysfunction of their own family. It all leads up to the intervention, where the addict is told by their family how much they are loved but also confronted with a choice, to either get help right then or lose contact with their family. Sometimes the addict turns it down but most of the time they accept the offer and go into rehab. It's the same basic story over and over. And that's how addicts make their way towards freedom from the bondage of addiction, which is to confront and work through the question, "Where does it hurt?" Freedom from addiction requires taking up your cross, walking through the suffering, dying to that part of yourself so that you can experience a sort of resurrection into a new life. An addict and their family can't get there unless they come along someone who loves them and can ask the question, "Where does it hurt?"

Last week, I joined twenty five other people throughout the country to participate in an on-line learning experience called "The Practice of Showing Up: The Spirituality of Anti-Racist Work." It is an opportunity for white people who are dedicated to dismantling systems of oppression to come together and work through the damage that these systems of oppression has inflicted on us as white people. Oppression not only hurts the oppressed, it hurts the oppressor as well in subtle but real ways. It does damage to the soul. One of the points the facilitators make is that anti-racist work is trauma work. That's where the spirituality of anti-racist work, or justice work generally, comes into play. Working for a more just world, where systems of oppression are dismantled so that people are free to be their whole, best selves, is trauma work. It is spiritual healing work. And so, as we move into this time together, we are going to be looking at our own family histories, we are going to reflect on our own complicity in structures of oppression that we receive advantages from, often without even realizing it, we are going to come alongside each other with love and address the question,

“Where does it hurt?” Freedom from bondage to racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, requires taking up our crosses, walking into the places of suffering, let something of ourselves die so that we can experience a sort of resurrection into new life. Tearing down systems of oppression must include coming along someone who loves you who can ask you the question, “Where does it hurt?”

To experience freedom from the sin and death that binds us, to experience a sort of resurrection into new life, we have to walk with Jesus, pick up our crosses and go where it hurts. We have to confront the suffering. We cannot deny it, become numb to it, let suffering control us, or bypass it. We have to pick up our crosses of suffering, whatever that looks like, so that we can lose that life of hurt and suffering, die to that kind of life and be resurrected into new life.

But we can't do it alone. It's too hard. We too easily deceive ourselves about what binds us. We deflect. Or we close in on ourselves, afraid to be vulnerable, afraid of “going there,” where the pain lives. Too often we suffer in silence. And the suffering itself binds us, even sapping the life from us, slowly killing our souls. We need others in our life who love us, people who also suffer and are seeking to confront and be set free from that which causes our suffering, that which binds and destroys. We have to carry our crosses of suffering and death together. That's what we are at our best, a cross-carrying community.

What would that look like for us? What would it be like if we were a community who have determined to take up our crosses and walk the path of suffering, death and resurrection? Try to imagine it now. Imagine that you are surrounded by fellow sufferers, people who are broken and hurt just like you are, people who love you and will not reject you or abandon you. Imagine you are in a circle of friends who can ask you the question, “Where does it hurt?” I think all of us need that kind of community. I believe that this community gathered here has the makings of becoming more like the kind of community we need. Are we willing to go there? Are we willing to lay our defenses down, make ourselves vulnerable, and venture into where it hurts?