

What R U Up 2?

February 25, 2018

Title: Take Up

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-7, 15-16

Mark 8:31-38

I get chills every time I hear or sing that song. It reminds me how very important this thing is that we call being a Christian. "I have decided to follow Jesus. The world behind me, the cross before me. Though none go with me, still I will follow, no turning back, no turning back." It really is probably the most important decision that we will ever make in our lives. It is the basis from which everything else in our lives flows.

And during Lent, when we hear passages like today's gospel reading with Jesus telling us to "deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him" it becomes particularly obvious that this is not a play in the sun, laugh all day and have fun kind of commitment. Now, don't get me wrong, there can and will be lots of playing in the sun, laughing and having fun, but that is the result of following Jesus, not the motive or even the primary purpose for doing so.

Just before today's gospel reading, Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The answers had been varied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets." "But who do you say that I am?" asked Jesus. Peter, ever the impetuous one, ever the one to jump up and do something, always the one ready replied, "You are the Christ." In Matthew's gospel, Jesus commends Peter and says that he is blessed because God has revealed this to him. This is where, in Matthew's gospel, Peter is told that he is the rock upon which the church will be built. As is also common in Mark's gospel, nothing more is said, and Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

“Christ” is the Greek word. The Hebrew word is “Messiah”. There were many ideas about who the messiah would be, what he would do. One of the more popular ones was that the Christ, or the Messiah, would overthrow Rome and set the Jewish people free from their domination. There were other ideas as well, but it seems that Jesus decided that it was time to try to help his disciples understand what they had really gotten into; what being the Christ, or the Messiah, really meant.

Jesus began to teach them that he would suffer many things and be rejected by the leaders – the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. Jesus in one of three places in Mark’s gospel teaches them that he was to be killed. Jesus does also say, that after three days he will rise again, but I think by this time, the disciples were no longer hearing him.

Peter, once again, is the one who responds, the one who takes matters into his own hand. He took Jesus aside and tried to set him straight. Can’t you just hear him. “Now, Jesus, hold on just a minute. Think about what you are saying here. We left our families and our jobs to come and follow you and be part of saving our people. You’re a great preacher and teacher and you can heal people and people are following you and it won’t be long before we have enough people with us to really take action. It won’t be long before you can be the one in charge and we’ll all be there to help you. We’re ready to work with you for our freedom. We know it won’t be easy, but you can do it. But you have to stop talking about suffering and being rejected. If you talk like that people won’t come with you. And what’s this about dying – forget that. God sent you to be our Messiah, to save us. You can’t die!”

Now, we don’t really know what Peter said to Jesus that day, but it is clear that Peter was trying to convince Jesus to approach things differently,

trying to divert him from the path that Jesus was describing. Peter is so wrapped up in his thoughts and ideas and plans, that he can't hear what Jesus is saying. Jesus has dealt with this before. Right after his baptism, he had spent a long time in the wilderness being tempted by Satan to use his powers for himself, for glory, rather than for God. Jesus response to Peter is "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of humans."

Now, I really don't know if there is any such being as Satan, but what I do know is that Satan is whatever keeps us from seeing Jesus as he is. Satan is whatever diverts us from Jesus.

It's really hard to get our agenda out of the way and to focus on what God wants, and what God is calling us to be and to do. It's really hard for many of us to let God be God and to realize that we are not. Any attempt on our part to make God into what we want God to be, rather than meeting God on God's terms diverts us away from God and could be called satanic.

I think we have to be careful, and we have to be willing to entertain the possibility that we may not always have clarity and certainty about God's will. All we have to do is look around us at the many people seeking to be faithful Christians who disagree strongly on so many different topics.

So, like Peter, we need to pay attention to our motivation. We need to be open to really hear what God is saying to us, not just what we want to hear God saying. One of the commentators put it more clearly than I can. "The truth about who God is contradicts what we expect on the basis of our own feelings about divinity. The truth is that God's mercy is given to sinners, not reserved for the righteous. God's strength is exposed in weakness, not displayed in power. God's wisdom is veiled in parable and paradox, not set out in self-help maxims. God's life is disclosed in death.

“God is not conformed to human expectations or desires, for God is found in uncertainty, danger and suffering Precisely where human wisdom perceives God’s absence.”ⁱ

To those listening to Jesus that day, his words would have been disturbing at the very least and most likely quite frightening. After being rebuked by Peter, Jesus continued to try to help people understand who he was and what this was all about. “He 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.’”

For those listening to Jesus that day, the cross was terribly frightening. The Roman government used crucifixion as a way to brutally kill people who were opposed to the government. About 70 years before Jesus’ Crucifixion, a historian recorded that 2,000 people were crucified in a single day for the entertainment of a Roman general. It was horrible and frightening, so when Jesus talked about taking up their cross, I imagine that a lot of people might have been thinking about running away from this.

Nearly 2,000 years later, we have sanitized and civilized the cross so that many of us have beautiful pieces of jewelry shaped like crosses and in most of our churches the cross looks nice. In Protestant churches, it is an empty cross so that we focus more on resurrection than on crucifixion. But what Jesus was saying was terrifying and undoubtedly very confusing. How can you lose your life if you are trying to save it, and saving your life when you lose it?

I don’t hear it as much as I used to, but I used to hear people say, “It’s my cross to bear” when they were talking about an illness, a difficult circumstance in life, something that was unpleasant or sorrowful. I’ve also

heard people tell someone else, “That’s your cross to bear” speaking about such things as cancer, poverty, divorce and so forth.

Friends, I do not believe that this is what Jesus was saying when he talked about taking up our cross. Jesus was not glorifying suffering. Remember that during his ministry, he healed people on the sabbath because it was not right that they should suffer even one more day.

Knowing that the cross in Jesus’ time was a symbol of insurrection and rebellion against the government, Jesus seems to be saying that he is not going to compromise with imperial or religious authorities. His loyalty was to God first and only. He would always seek the rule of God; he would seek God’s justice that saves people from oppression.

In 2004, after seeing Mel Gibson’s movie “The Passion of the Christ”, I had a discussion with a friend about whether or not Jesus had to die. I contend that Jesus could have avoided the cross. He could have run away. He could have gone into hiding. He did not have to die; but, and this is a very big “but”. If he had run away or gone into hiding, then he would not have been true to who he was. The cross was the consequence of him always teaching about justice, mercy, and love. It was the consequence of him refusing to participate in oppression, brutality, and becoming a threat to those who were in power. When Jesus talked about his death, he was not only saying that there was danger ahead, but that he was going to walk straight into it, knowing what he was doing.

When Jesus tells his followers and us, that we must take up our cross, he is not telling us to suffer under an unpleasant burden as in “we all have our crosses to bear” but rather, he is calling us to a way of life. It is not a safe or smart path as the world defines security or success, rather it is the way to be faithful to Jesus and to the God he presents.

In every generation, there is always a challenge for individuals and for churches to struggle not only to think but also to live from God's point of view knowing that we are doing this in a world where such a thing is considered foolish, or at least countercultural. Choosing to put Jesus' vision and teachings before our own preferences and desires is not always easy.

Peter needed to take a leap of faith and step away from his idea of what the messiah should do, and instead pay attention to what Jesus was saying; pay attention to God's plan. It took Peter to places he hadn't anticipated, but he remained faithful to Jesus and Jesus' way throughout his life. Certainly, he faltered – this was not the only time. You may remember that on the night that Jesus was betrayed, Peter not only denied that he was a follower of Jesus', but he also denied that he even knew Jesus – and he did this not once but three times.

Jesus calls us to take up the cross – to take up the things that Jesus took up - to stand for love, mercy, compassion, and justice. Jesus calls us to focus on who God is – not who we want God to be.

I was talking with a friend of mine this week about the scripture and about this idea of Peter's that Jesus needed Peter to tell him what kind of messiah he was supposed to be. We talked about the idea that we think we can tell God what to do. She shared the gist of a devotional that she had read. The person writing it said that he had asked Jim Forbes a professor at Union Seminary, to help him understand the difference between predominately white and predominately black churches. He said he asked because he had experienced a power in the worship of the black church that he didn't find in white churches. "Jim, whose background was in an African-American Pentecostal church".. responded, "In predominately

Caucasian congregations people believe God needs them; in predominately African American churches, people understand that they need God.”ⁱⁱ

That is, of course a generalization, but think about it for a minute. Peter thought Jesus needed to be instructed in how to be the Messiah. Another friend shared the thought that when we pray, we often ask God to take care of a situation for us and then proceed to give God what we consider to be the acceptable solutions. “Okay, God. Chose A, B or C. Whatever you think is best.”

When we do that, when we think that God needs us to tell God the best way to handle a situation, we are limiting God and we are setting ourselves up for a big letdown, when God’s response is not what we want. When, instead, we realize that we need God, we discover a freedom and a faith that can change our lives.

We discover a God who instead of rescuing and protecting us from trouble, rescues us by entering into the trouble with us. We discover a God who instead of helping us to avoid pain, heals us from our pain by entering into the depths of our pain with us. We discover a God who instead of fixing things for us, addresses them by becoming weak with us and being with us in our weakness.

But this is the foolishness of the cross. We want a God who will heal us and make us feel better, but we get a God who enters into our pain and bears our pain with us. To the part of us that is human and looking at the world’s point of view this is incomprehensible, and we want something more. But to the part of us that is being saved through Christ it is the very power of God. It means that no matter what we face in life, we know that we do not face it alone. When tragedy strikes it means that we have not

been abandoned by God, but rather that God is present with us in the middle of all the garbage of life. It means that we need God.

But even more, this foolish cross, this foolish cross that we are to take up, reminds us that while we need God, God does also need us. While God is with us in the middle of the garbage of life, God expects us to do the same with each other. We are to enter into each other's pain. We are to bear each other's burdens and even those of the world around us. We do this when we share our prayer concerns with each other and take them seriously, praying for people we do not even know. We do this when we stand with those who are most in need and work to find ways to ease their burdens. We do this when we give up what may be important to us so that someone else can have what they most need.

To the world that is an utterly foolish way to live. Our world, our culture tells us to look out for ourselves, to take care of ourselves, to make as much money as we can and to get as many things as we can. But to those who embrace the cross, to those who take up their cross and follow Jesus it is the only way to live. It is the power of God within us. In the process we lose focus on ourselves first and find our real selves. In the process, we become mature enough to give ourselves to others.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word, Theological commentary on Mark's passage

ⁱⁱ Shared by Pat MacHugh. Relates to Tony Robinson and a daily meditation "Still Speaking"