

TALK ABOUT SUFFERING

This morning we encounter Jesus' first words to his disciples about the suffering he will face. And they don't want to hear it. Peter rebukes him – and then gets rebuked by Jesus.

Then 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.

These words are so unsettling to the disciples that Jesus has to remind them again on two additional occasions. Perhaps even more challenging, Jesus makes suffering for the sake of the Gospel not just part of his ministry but the ministry of all who would follow him. While his “passion prediction” is shared just with the disciples, moments later Jesus calls the crowd over and says,

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.

As Mark Twain once noted, “It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.” There is no dodging Jesus words about suffering. They are pretty straight forward. And yet, generations of Jesus' followers have wrestled with them.

Our scripture selection this morning follows on the heels of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am” as they are traveling through the villages in Caesarea Philippi. It marks the first correct human statement about Jesus' identity in Mark's Gospel. It also marks a shift from the first half of Mark's Gospel that focuses on Jesus' healing and teaching to the second half that begins Jesus' journey to Jerusalem where he will ultimately suffer and die. We are at the hinge point between Jesus' preaching in Galilee and Jesus' preparing the disciples for suffering before he enters into Jerusalem. Since the disciples participate in the ministry of Jesus, they must also learn to share the suffering of Jesus.

So, let's talk about suffering. Ricky Skaggs popularized the traditional song “Talk About Suffering”

Talk about suffering here below
And let's keep a-followin' Jesus
Talk about suffering here below
And let's keep a-lovin' Jesus

The gospel train is comin'
Now don't you want to go

And leave this world of sorrow
And troubles here below

Oh, can't you hear it sister?
And don't you want to go
And leave this world of sorrow
And troubles here below

Like many traditional/gospel type songs along the lines of “Some Glad Morning I’ll Fly Away” or “To Canaan’s Land I’m On My Way,” suffering comes across as something that is part and parcel of living in this world and our great hope is that someday we’ll be able to escape from it and travel on or fly away to heaven where we will at least be free of suffering and all will be well. While there is great comfort in this notion, it can fool us into thinking that suffering is something to avoid at all costs – that our goal in life should be to minimize our own suffering, that suffering and self-sacrifice are always undesirable, that God has no part in suffering other than to take us out of it. But that “flies” in the face of what Jesus asks of us as his disciples, his followers. And here I think it is important to distinguish between the suffering that comes from being human, the suffering we all encounter along our life’s journey: sickness, broken relationships, disappointments, injustice, the death of family and friends, facing our own mortality; and suffering for the sake of the Gospel. The suffering of which Jesus speaks is the suffering that comes with fully living into being followers of Jesus. It is the suffering that comes with aligning ourselves with the poor, the dispossessed, the persecuted, the outcast. It is the suffering that inevitably comes with challenging the way things are so that they might become more as God intends them to be.

As those who are largely privileged, this form of suffering is a choice. Sadly, for far too many in our world and in our society, it is not a choice but a day to day lived reality. As Presbyterian minister Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana notes, for too many of us:

We’d like to continue living as we currently do, just happier—more faithfully would be fine, so long as we stay comfortable. We’d rather not be transformed, but we’re willing to be improved. We’re not sure about being saved, but enhanced? Yes, please.

But that’s not the Gospel. That’s not the call we receive from Jesus.

The late archbishop and now saint, Oscar Romero, from El Salvador once said:

“A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed — what gospel is that?”

Romero follows in the footsteps of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who distinguished between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” UCC Minister Rev. Emily Heath helpfully sums it up this way:

Cheap grace requires nothing from us. Bonhoeffer describes it as “grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” We are not changed by cheap grace, and so it is not really from God. Costly grace, on the other hand, “is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.” But costly grace is not just costly; it is also grace. “It is costly because it costs a man his life,” writes Bonhoeffer, “and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.”

So, what would it mean for us – for you, for me, to answer Jesus’ call to take up our cross and follow?

How might we engage in resisting and changing our world alongside those who suffer from oppression and injustice? What response is Jesus inviting into in this moment? That's a very particular question. There are things we are called to do as a community of faith, that we sort out together, and there are things we are called to do as individual disciples that we invited into in particular moments. These are necessarily big things. The great preacher Fred Craddock once pointed out that

The reality for most Christians in this country is seldom a life-and-death matter. We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table—"Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all." But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25¢ here and 50¢ there... Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25¢ at a time.

These days, our society needs more than 25 cents from each of us. To pick just one specific for us to reflect upon this morning, what would you do if someone said or did something overtly racist in your presence? What would you do, after the joke had been told, or the rude comment expressed, of the physical mistreatment happened right in front of you? What would it mean to shift from being a bystander, to trying to be a *upstander*? Now this isn't easy. While I was serving in my previous church, our congregation a wonderful relationship with a black congregation, The People's Baptist Church." At one point, they were engaged in a capital campaign and invited our congregation to a fund raising dinner. As I was standing in the food line with a prominent and beloved member of my congregation, that parishioner turned to me and said, "Look at all the – derogatory name for African Americans – in this room." I was stunned. I didn't know what to say or do, so I just stood there. The moment passed and we went back to inching forward in the buffet line. I chose in that moment to be a bystander rather than an upstander and I've regretted it ever since.

When we see someone being hurt or mistreated, we need to be the people who do something about it, not the ones who choose to avert our eyes and keep walking. Upstanding is like standing fast—the literal definition of the word *resist*. To choose to do something, to stand up to what is unjust, is to resist the culture of destruction that surrounds us. As we continue our lives as Jesus' disciples – as his followers – let us take his words to heart, being willing to sacrifice our status, our privilege, our respectability, our likeableness, in order to enter into the suffering that God call us to, not to add to our misery but to transform us more fully into the people Jesus invites us to become as we work to resist and overcome the injustice, the poverty, the unjust suffering of others in our time, in the places we live, work, frequent and (someday) travel to.

Let's keep following, loving Jesus — boarding the Gospel train not to escape this life but to more fully live into it as God's people.

AMEN.