

A Sermon Offering from Rev. Lloyd Bruce, Sackville, NB.
(delivered Lent 02B-2021 – Black History Month – Feb 28th)

Mark 8:31-38

Then he 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

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 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.

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

REFLECTION

There is a whole lot of rebuking going on in this passage, and by the end of this sermon you may feel that you too are being rebuked for something that you might feel is beyond your control.

First, let's set the stage.

The reading from Mark's gospel represents a turning point in Jesus' ministry, a time when he extends a second, deeper call to his disciples.

We remember that when they started out together, he called them from their fishing nets or other places of employment and simply said, "Follow me." Now they have been following him for a few years. They understand more of who he is and what he is about. In fact, just before our reading, Peter has made the grand declaration that Jesus is the Messiah.

Immediately after being called Messiah, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man or the Human One. The Human One is a figure from the book of Daniel which was written two hundred years earlier, at another point in history when Israel was resisting the oppression of a foreign power.

The Human One is someone who opposes injustice but does so without violence or destruction. To the Human One, God grants an everlasting dominion.

Jesus identifies with this Human One in the book of Daniel because he wants to get past the disciples' preconceptions about the term Messiah.

The way they understand it, Messiah necessarily means royal triumph, the overthrow of Rome and the restoration of Israel's collective honor.

It took a certain courage to leave their homes to follow Jesus. Somewhere along the way they have come to trust in him, to believe that he could even be the Messiah.

Now he is telling them that continuing to follow is going to take even more courage. He wants them to be prepared and so he chips away at their preconceptions.

Jesus wants his disciples to be prepared and so he says that anyone who wants to follow him will have to take up a cross.

The cross had only one meaning in the Roman empire. It meant a painful, torturous execution. Fear of the cross was the way that Rome maintained its power. The paradox of the Gospel is this: when people resist that fear and pursue the Realm of God, even at the cost of their lives, they work on shattering of the power of Empire.

This is what Fannie Lou Hamer understood, when as an African American woman, she decided to register to vote in Mississippi in 1962. She was rightfully afraid, but she said, ". . . what was the point of being scared? The only thing they could do was kill me, and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time since I could remember."

The Gospel writer, likely out of their experience and understanding, has Jesus tell the disciples that following him will mean bearing a cross. He is being as blunt as he can be. They will try to kill you, but they have been trying to do that a little bit at a time for forever. So find the courage to follow me anyway.

The idea of taking up a cross has come to mean something very different in recent times. People say "That's just my cross to bear" to describe any kind of suffering, like putting up with a cantankerous relative or dealing with cancer. You might call on your faith to cope with those instances of suffering or many others, but that it is not what Jesus was talking about.

Baptist scholar Alan Culpepper says, "Taking up the cross means being at work where God is at work in the world to relieve suffering and injustice, to rescue the weak, and to bring peace and justice to bear in the human community."^[4]

... being at work where God is at work in the world to relieve suffering and injustice, to rescue the weak, and to bring peace and justice to bear in the human community...

And I would like to suggest to you that the place we are most called to be at work at alongside God on this final day of February and Black History month, is in the work of anti-racism and justice making for marginalized persons as we do our work of examining our white privilege and cultural self-righteousness.

At the risk of taking you down a rabbit hole that may leave you disoriented, let me introduce you to two ten-dollar words that I used to love to try and throw into sentences during my second year at UPEI – epistemology and ontology: the study of how we know and the study of existence or becoming...

And without boring you to death with details, let me simply say that how we know and how we come who are as individuals and as community is largely and by largely, I mean hugely influence by the culture we are immersed in.

We inherit racist perceptions of the world because of the culture we are immersed in. Our way of being in the world, is shaped by a world of our making – of dominant culture – up until recent times, there was no accountability, no checks and balances... and even now, it is still marginalized communities that are trying to hold a mirror up to the pervasive power of whiteness in the world.

Oluwatomisin Oredein, a Professor, at Brite Divinity School, in an article in Faith and Leadership writes,

There is an obliviousness in white belief, an assumption that to be white is to be good and morally upright. But as womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas reminds us, white belief is steeped in American exceptionalism,[\(link is external\)](#) the myth that white Americanness is best.

The horrific events of Jan. 6, 2021, punctuate this exceptionalist belief; contrary to popular aphorism, it was not a “dark” day in American history -- it was a supremely white one.

White imagination produces American exceptionalism and nurtures white belief. And this white belief extends into the religious imagination as well.

The presumption of white inerrancy and subsequently righteousness is a tradition and practice often fortified in white communities and churches. It often fights back violently when challenged by the perspectives of minoritized communities.

It is this white exceptionalism that has us, as followers of Jesus, casting plaster figures of Jesus and painting his hair pale blonde... it is this same white exceptionalism that has us, as disciples of Jesus, followers like Peter, feeling uncomfortable when racist attitudes are named within our rank, and not wanting to listen when called out and rebuked for our blindness to racism in the Church and our larger community. We'd like to maintain the status quo – after all, who benefits? We do.

But to this, Jesus says, “Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then Jesus turns to the crowds and captures the essence of his message in two sentences: “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.”

I don't know about you, but I can relate very well to Peter's unease about this hard, hard teaching. Even now, centuries removed from the context in which Jesus lived and taught, I shiver as I consider the implications of his words. What exactly was he saying? That he wants us to pursue suffering and death? That a holy life is not about living at all, but about dying? About martyrdom?

What does it mean to deny myself? Living, as I do, in a culture that doesn't imprison, torture, or kill Christians for our faith, how shall I deny myself so that the gospel might thrive, here and now? How shall I save my life by losing it for Jesus's sake in this time and place? How shall I die?

This week, I have asked myself these questions in light of the ongoing chorus of marginalized voices shouting, Black Lives Matter... and the ever-growing realization that those in power must be held to account, must be called to examine the power that they hold and how that power may be more equitable distributed – the power to influence, shape and control...

To take up a cross as Jesus did is to stand, always, in the midst of the world's pain, to hear the chant, 'Black Lives Matter' as the cry for justice that it is and engage in soul searching examination...

Not just glance in the general direction of suffering and then sidle away, but to dwell there. To listen to the stories of lives affected by racism and identity as much as possible with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying.

Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us, and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating that pain — no matter what it costs us.

In the case of ongoing racism within our communities it means moving beyond “thoughts and prayers” and trying to be polite and keep the peace to digging deep into the culture that shapes us and working as a Church to live out a commitment to peace, justice, and human flourishing.

How will you die? How will the Church die? Will we hoard what we have in fear? Seek to protect the culture that we know?

The United Church as a result of the experience at the 2018 General Council has made a commitment to becoming an anti-racist denomination. In a proposal presented to the General Council Executive last June the Church heard these words:

Public statements are not enough. Words are not enough. This is a moment for The United Church of Canada to wrestle with its White privilege, its role in systematizing anti-Black racism within its own policies, procedures, and practices, and its role within the wider Canadian context. There is a need to make becoming an anti-racist denomination and dealing with anti-Black racism within our denomination a missional priority at all levels of the denomination.

May it be so. May it be so.