

Mark 8:31-38

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

February 25, 2024 Second Sunday in Lent

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As a preacher and theologian, my ears are always tuned to moments when you hear popular figures or situations where God is mentioned. (It's always good to notice where God is at work, to point it out to others.) That's why I notice after the Superbowl, or after an NBA victory, in interviews with the most valuable player, frequently they will credit God with their good playing, and the victory. It's great to give God the glory—I appreciate that. But then I started wondering: have you ever heard the loser say “I'm thankful to God for being with me in this very disappointing moment?” Or, “I'm really suffering right now, after all my best efforts and hard work, I failed. But God, is still with me.” No. Those interviews don't happen, because we like winners, and the losing route is something we don't really want to explore.

Often the Gospel reading challenges our conventional thinking. Just like our reading from Mark, today: imagine how Peter felt. Here was their beloved leader Jesus, one who was clearly making a positive difference in their world. He was bringing so much healing and light into the broken, hurting community. Then, Jesus says: “I'm going to suffer, be rejected, humiliated, and be killed. Anyone who is following me has to experience something like that, too.” What?!

We don't have the details of Peter's rebuke, but I imagine it went something like this. Peter draws Jesus aside and says “Jesus, we need good news; we need hope! Don't be dragging us all down with that negativity. How do you expect to have any followers with that kind of doom and gloom?” Jesus' reaction? “Get behind me, Satan!” Doesn't that seem a little harsh? After all, Peter made a good point.

Friends, on this second Sunday of Lent, we read of great suffering, rejection, death and rising. You might be thinking--Gee-- where is the good news in all of this?

The good news is that we can trust God to be with us in loss. And, we have all lost. We've lost jobs, we've lost friends, we've lost hope, we've lost children, we've lost innocence, we've lost health, we've lost hearing, and sight, and senses, we've lost a pastor and family, we've lost a relationship, we've lost parents, we've lost our way. . . The good news is that Jesus knows what suffering and loss is, and promises to walk the way of rejection and loss with us.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther had an insight about the human ways of doing things, in contrast to God's ways. He made a distinction between “The Way of Glory” (the human way) and “The Way of the Cross” (God's way). Jesus' rebuke to Peter – was showing that Peter's way of thinking was tied too much to glory. And that Jesus way is to relinquish the human way of glory and to follow God's way. The human way is worldly power, being in control, being the best, even if it means using force to get what you want. It's being the winner!

Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus' sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. Jesus showed us that God's power is through vulnerability and weakness.

We are fascinated by conventional power—power to purchase, power to enforce our will. We are put off by any form of powerlessness. But it is precisely the powerlessness of God enacted by Jesus on the cross that saves us.

The way of the cross is demanding and costly because it contradicts the domination way of the world. The political implication of early Christians following “the Way” and proclaiming Jesus as Lord—was what got them in trouble with Rome.

Brian Zahnd, author of the book *Postcards from Babylon* noted that the American church has been cozily allied with the high claims of US nationalism that tilts toward imperialism. We are attached to military ideology, winning wars, and the domination of other nations and their markets. He writes that a theology of the cross for our time and place in the US is inescapably countercultural because the God of the Gospel is in passionate solidarity with the vulnerable.

I’m remembering to March, 2018, when my two adolescent sons and I joined between 1 and 2 million others for the March for our Lives Rally in Washington, DC, following the mass shooting of students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Florida. The rally was led by high school students who survived the shooting, five weeks after the Valentine’s Day shooting. It’s really difficult to imagine a more vulnerable state than being a young person, sitting in class, and the violent power of a shooter changing their lives forever.

In terms of power structures and the conventional human ways, this rally shouldn’t have happened. It was Senate or President, or adults in power that made it happen. The instigators and leaders of this rally, that became a movement, were teenagers, who because of their youth, were in the vulnerable position of not even being able to vote, yet.

How do we keep focused on what is most important in our grounding in Christ, today, together? How do we keep focused not on the theology of glory, but on the theology of the cross? Most of us are not consciously wielding our power to glorify ourselves over others. But, is there some way that in our daily lives we are living with the conventional wisdom of needing control, needing our way, needing to win, at the expense of others? I think that’s a very important question for congregations to ask themselves. As with every privilege, it’s very difficult to see in ourselves. But the more we are connected to our neighbor, the less likely it is that we’ll be clinging to “glory” and our own way, and the more we’ll love with a healthy humility.

Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "The person who’s in love with their vision of community will destroy community. But the person who loves the people around them will create community everywhere they go."

How do we live faithfully in a culture seeped in glory-theology? First of all, know that in our vulnerability, God is with us. And let it inspire us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. Activist David Orr suggests how that may inspire our choices: “The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it.

I’m closing with these words from Brian Zahnd: “The contemporary task of the church is to untether Jesus from the interests of empire, and to see radical Jesus’ ideas actually are. Enemies? Love them. Violence? Renounce it. Money? Share it. Foreigners? Welcome them. Sinners? Forgive them.