**March 1, 2015**

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As you may have noticed, we’ve skipped ahead in Mark, to a more appropriate Lenten story. Don’t worry, though, we’ll pick up with the stuff we’ve missed after Pentecost. So to sum up, between Jesus’ baptism and now, he’s healed a bunch of people, cast out a slew of demons, fed not 5,000, but 9,000 men and their families, picked up a dozen disciples, taught the crowds using some inscrutable parables, and generally proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God. Busy guy!

So after all that, this is sort of “come to Jesus” moment for both the disciples and the larger crowds. He starts with Peter and the rest of the Twelve. A couple of verses before this passage, he had asked them first who the people thought he was. The disciples told him that Elijah, or one of the prophets, or even John the Baptist, was the general consensus among the hoi polloi.

So Jesus gets more personal. “Who do YOU say I am?” Peter, in his usual impetuous fashion answers first, “You are the Christ!” DING DING DING! Right answer, Pete! You now win the prize of finding out exactly what’s going to happen shortly. And Jesus proceeds to lay out the suffering and death that’s ahead for him.

The text says he said this quite openly and plainly. There are no parables here to try to figure out. It’s all there out in the open not hidden, not sugar coated. Peter, our exemplar of human behavior, reacts as we might expect him to. As we ourselves would probably react, given similar circumstances. He takes Jesus aside and tries to set him straight.

The translations all say Peter rebuked Jesus, which is the standard meaning of the word, but I like another version, which is “to warn by instructing.” Peter has just acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, and his first act after that faithful declaration is to tell Jesus how to do his business. It’s kind of funny, really, but then Peter is often funny, mainly because he’s so much like we are.

But Jesus is deadly serious, and shocks Peter by calling him Satan. That had to sting! But he’s being very specific in his name-calling. Satan, after all, is the one who tempted Jesus in the desert, so this is a nice bookend with the text we heard last week. His next sentence makes his point even clearer. Peter has his mind on the human world, not the divine one, and Jesus can’t afford to let that influence him as he heads to Jerusalem.

Then, while Peter is trying to think of a suitable retort (at least in my mind he is) Jesus calls all the crowd around him and the disciples, and lets them know what they are facing if they follow him. It’s a sobering speech, and full of paradoxes. If you want to live, be prepared to lose your life. But if you lose your life, you will be saved. And what good will it do you to gain the whole world, if you lose your life in the process?

This paradox is the crux of the matter. First of all, Jesus isn’t necessarily talking about our physical lives here, although we can be excused for thinking that, since he just got done telling the disciples that he was heading to his death. And certainly being killed was a possibility for Jesus’ followers, too, then as now, considering what’s going on in the Middle East.

But the word Mark uses for life in this case is *psyche*, not the more typical word, *zoe*. *Psyche*, or as we pronounce it, psyche, does mean life, but in the sense of the soul or individual identity of a person, as opposed to their physical life. Here’s where we get tripped up by our post-Enlightenment mindsets. We can’t escape the idea that we are, each of us individually, of supreme importance. But Jesus is telling us that we have to let that go, to lose our self for the sake of the Gospel.

Boy, that’s hard. It’s really, REALLY hard. Letting go of our self importance, our security, our personal accomplishments, and everything that makes us, in a sense, who we are, or at least who we THINK we are, even for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel, is HARD.

And let’s take it one step further and fast forward 2,000 years. What if, by extension, the Church is being asked to give up ITS life. What if Trinity Wall Street were being asked to give up its billions of dollars (you heard that right – BILLIONS) in assets for Jesus’ sake? What if St. John the Divine is being asked to give up its half-finished airplane hangar of a cathedral building for Jesus’ sake? What if we, here at Grace, are being asked to give up our endowment for Jesus’ sake?

And that’s just the money. Money comes and goes. But what about power and position? The Episcopal Church is not a large piece of the Christian pie, by Roman Catholic and Methodist standards, at least. And, except for the East Coast, we’re not a particularly wealthy denomination. But oh, do we take ourselves seriously. And frankly, this is starting to have an effect on our mission as the Body of Christ – to clothe the naked, feed the poor, shelter the homeless, and generally care for the least of our brothers and sisters.

Yesterday, Mother Margaret up on the Cheyenne River posted another one of her unforgettable blogs. In it she talks about the Church’s responsibility towards the poorest among us. This is in response to something that the Episcopal Church leadership is considering for the next General Convention. They have decided that it’s time for the mission areas to become self-sufficient – to pull their own weight.

Think about that for a minute. The Episcopal Church, with all of its resources, has decided that caring for the poor costs too much and now those same poor must just pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and become productive members of the Church. The practical aspect of this is that they hope to pass a resolution to cut funding to the mission dioceses, and cut it by a lot.

Does this sound familiar? It should, because this same kind of thing has been the focus of much of the political rhetoric over the past several years. All this talk about moochers and users and drains on society has made its way firmly into the hallowed halls of the Church, and frankly, the Church should be ashamed.

Jesus makes no mention of teaching people to be self sufficient. He only talks about taking care of those in need, as if they were Jesus, himself. Jesus didn’t suggest that we hold something back for a rainy day, or just in case we might need it. He said, “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.” It’s what we’re being called to do.

Dean Mike Kinman of Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis wrote in his weekly blog about the Gospel for this week, “Will we be a church that fearfully holds onto our life and never ends up living? Or will we be a church that is willing to die to follow Jesus?” This is a question we need to all ask ourselves.

How much are we willing to give up for the sake of the Gospel? If the answer isn’t “everything” we might need to reconsider. Will we fearfully hold onto our lives or be willing to give everything to follow Jesus?

Mother Margaret talks about how continuing to support the missions could change the Church, fundamentally. She writes:

*There is so much the Church can learn here --not by coming here and staying two days or a week, or fixing a building --all of which we welcome, all of which we need to survive. But by taking on the true poverty here, which we proclaim as a gift from heaven (--but only if it is for others, yes?!). Living with it in your homes. Having only one pot, one jacket, one set of shoes.* [*By learning how to live, truly live as people without power, people without voice, people hungry for good bread, hungry for justice.*](https://www.archchicago.org/departments/stewardship_dev/pdf/theology_scripture/church_teaching.pdf)*[[1]](#footnote-1)*

By giving up itself, the Church could save its own soul.

There is one final comforting note in today’s Gospel. Jesus 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.” The primary meaning of the word that’s translated here as “follow” is really “to accompany.” So Jesus is telling us, even as we take up our own crosses, whatever they might be, and even as we give up our very lives to his service, that he will be right there with us. No matter how hard it gets, or if we feel like we can’t give any more, Jesus is there. Always.

Amen.

1. The Rev. Margaret Watson, <http://leaveitlay.blogspot.com/2015/02/help-us-learn-how-to-live-truly-live-as.html>, accessed 2/28/15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)