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Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

February 28, 2021

The Second Sunday of Lent

Ever thought you had life all figured out? Ever thought you knew the answers only to learn you knew absolutely nothing? It's that smack in the face, the sucker punch, the wedgie...I'm talking about the moments that throw you off balance and catch you off guard. Like tripping over your own shoe lace or running into a door...you look around to see if anyone noticed.

Here's the thing about thinking we have life all figured out... if we hold on so tight to the things we think we know, we often fail to see blessings right in front of us. We become afraid to admit we might not have had it right after all. We don't want things to change. We try so hard to hang on to what we think is true that we miss what life is trying so hard to teach us.

In our Gospel reading, we find Peter in just this kind of moment.

Peter thought he had it all figured out. And, you got to love him for his conviction. After all, he was the very first person to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. In our Gospel reading, I imagine him like the over-eager kid in school who just keeps raising his hand over and over to give the answers. You see, Peter had been paying attention...at least part of the time. He had been with Jesus through his healings and his teachings, through his advocacy and his acts of compassion. So, when Jesus asked...who do you say that I am...Peter raised his hand.

Jesus...I've got the answer! I know who you are! And then, the sucker punch. Jesus immediately upends Peter's reality.

Let me explain what is going on. Peter's answer, even though correct on the surface was missing the greater point, the greater truth of what being the Messiah was all about. Peter understood the Messiah to mean one thing...a strong leader who would challenge the Roman empire, upset the status quo, and take charge of the systems that had been so harmful. His vision of the Messiah was defined by power and might, by physical disruption of leaders and laws. It was the kind of Messiah who liberated with strength and force.

But Jesus says...no, Peter, I am not that kind of Messiah...I am going to suffer. I am going to be rejected and killed. And, that kind of gut punch stung. Peter is so resistant to what he is hearing, so caught off guard that he starts to argue with Jesus. This can't be true. This isn't what we have been promised. I don't want it to be true.

How could our Messiah suffer and die? That's not how it's supposed to work.

The reality, however, is that this is exactly how it is supposed to work. Peter just needs to be able to open his heart and mind to a new way of seeing. A new understanding. A new truth.

Mark is showing us what kind of Messiah Jesus actually is, not the Messiah folks wanted him to be. In that moment, I can imagine Peter wondering, what's the good news in this kind of reality?

Indeed...what is the good news of a suffering Messiah? Why is it necessary? And, how are we to understand it?

Ira Driggers, Professor of New Testament, says that, *"...the real epiphany...is not that Jesus' mission is to die, but that his faithfulness to God's healing mission will inevitably result in his death. In Mark, Jesus "must" die because his commitment to human healing will not falter."*

That is the good news in his suffering. In other words, Jesus is not going to let anything stand in his way when it comes to seeking justice, healing the sick, standing up for the oppressed. Even if that means suffering, so be it. His commitment to healing humanity is worth whatever he may encounter as a consequence.

Driggers goes on to say that *"Jesus dies because powerful humans oppose both his healing mission and, more specifically, the disruption that mission brings to established law and order."*

So, when Jesus calls people around him, in front of Peter, and says, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"* what he is teaching is the beautiful, powerful, and courageous commitment to healing what is broken in our lives and in our world. Jesus is calling us to participate in the holy work of the cross...to ensure that our *commitment to human healing will not falter.*

Notice one other thing that Jesus says...if any *want* to become my followers. In other words, we have a choice. But make no mistake, the choice to follow requires not just a shift in our perspectives but an entire re-orienting of our priorities. It's risky. So...Jesus asks...what is your will? What do you want? What do you know is right and good and just?

That means when we find ourselves turning to numbness or apathy, when we find ourselves arguing with Jesus, when we discover that we are avoiding the work of love and mercy and grace and forgiveness...then it's time to let the sucker punch sink in. When we would rather avoid suffering than move through it, when we would rather keep our hands clean and our hearts sheltered, when we would rather define faith in terms that are comfortable...then it's time to consider that we didn't have all the answers after all.

Maybe the real answers, the answers Jesus wants us to grasp are right in front of us. Richard Rohr encourages us to... *"notice how Jesus talks to people, how he waits, how he listens, how he's patient, how he depends upon God, how he takes time for prayer, how he doesn't respond cynically or bitterly, but trustfully and yet truthfully."* We might add...notice how he is willing to stand up for others are whatever cost it may require. Notice how he risks having his heart

broken to make sure others' hearts may heal. Notice how he isn't worried about security for himself but about safety for others. That's teaching us that his commitment to human healing will not falter.

It reminds me of the end of the Prayer of St. Francis...

"let me not seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are raised to eternal life."

Because once we enter a Gospel kind of life, once we truly become followers of Jesus and take up our crosses...to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God...our lives will forever be changed. But that change is a blessing that puts our commitment to human healing at the heart of living. Thanks be to God. Amen.