

## LIVING INTO THE CRUCIFIED LIFE

St Andrew's UC, Sudbury; September 13, 2009

Mark 8:27-38

Crucifixion.

Kind of nasty practice.

Kind of nasty subject.

Who really wants to talk about crucifixion?

Not we, probably.

And certainly not Peter!

When Jesus starts waxing eloquent (and graphic)  
about all the nasty stuff that's ahead for him,  
Peter recoils in distaste.

"No, no, Jesus! Don't talk like that!

You're not heading for crucifixion.

You aren't going to die!

Please, let's have no more of that kind of talk.

Enough already."

But Jesus doesn't have the luxury of burying his head in the sand.

Some sort of crucifixion is inevitable for him

and, if he's going to be ready for it,

he has to face it squarely and without self-delusion.

It's not so much that Jesus *wants* to talk about crucifixion.

It's that he *must*.

And so he turns to Peter and rebukes right back at him:

"Peter, get out of my way!

Satan, get lost!

You have no idea how God works!"

No idea how God works!

But—but—

didn't Peter just moments ago identify Jesus as the Christ?

As God's anointed?

Isn't Peter the one who recognizes precisely how God works

in Jesus who reveals God's presence among us?

What can Jesus possibly mean when he says,

"You have no idea how God works!"

God works in mysterious ways, we like to say.  
(Usually when we are remarking on  
the way things seem to fit together  
when we haven't had control over the circumstances.  
Strange, we muse, that it all worked out this way.  
God works in mysterious ways.  
God's wonders to perform, of course.)

Generally speaking, we're on the same page as Peter  
when it comes to our christology—  
we can see, in the beauty and power and compassion of Jesus' living,  
the hand of God at work.

Remember, in Mark's gospel, "Jesus is as Jesus does."  
Jesus is the action man.  
He teaches, he preaches, he heals, he casts out demons,  
he feeds the hungry, raises the dead, calms the storm.  
That's how God works.  
That's what the disciples have seen.  
And Peter, bless him, is the one to say it for all of them:  
This is God's anointed.  
This is God at work.  
Everything Jesus says and does looks and feels and sounds right.

Until today.  
Until all this talk of suffering and crucifixion.  
That just messes with the whole idea of health and wholeness and new life.  
We like to talk about transformation and God's realm of justice.  
We like to share our faith when the focus is on love and what is lovely.  
But we, like Peter, tend to shy away from crucifixion talk.  
We save it for appropriate occasions.  
Such as Good Friday.  
And even then we might pass over it  
and skip from Palm Sunday to Easter.  
We are not too keen on all that blood-and-broken-body talk at communion.  
We worry about how our children and grandchildren will hear it  
and we try to find new ways of focusing on the eucharist—  
ways that are less disturbing and more invitational.

No, crucifixion is not our favourite faith topic.

It's much, much easier and greatly more gratifying  
to steer the conversation immediately toward resurrection  
and liberation and freedom and transformation.

But today Jesus hauls us back.

Today he asks us to take a little time  
to think about his crucifixion and ours.

Oh yes.

That's right, not only does the gospel lection this morning  
put Jesus' trial and crucifixion right in our faces,  
it barges right into a discussion about how discipleship  
means living into a crucified life.

By the time the conversation gets to this point,  
Jesus has asked the crowd to join his disciples.

The crowd? Well, that would be us,  
all the people who are invited to walk with Jesus on the Way.  
That is Mark's intention:

to have us all paying close attention  
as Jesus begins to describe the less palatable aspects of discipleship.

How did that feel, when the voice of Jesus today  
(channeled through Al Ritchie!)  
said to us, in the words offered by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*,  
**Anyone who comes with me has to let me lead.**

**You are not in the driver's seat; I am.**

**Don't run from suffering. Embrace it.....**

**Self-sacrifice is the way, *my* way, to salvation.**

That's just a tad counter-cultural, wouldn't you agree?

We're not that devoted to self-sacrifice  
in our privileged North American society.

We have been brought up to see success as achievement,  
as making it, as being effective in what we do.

Episcopal theologian Caroline Westerhoff says that  
"we hurry past Jesus' words about suffering and serving  
not because they are obvious or naïve  
but because they indict and offend us.

They startle us and whirl us around and nail us to the wall.  
We are afraid they just might be true."

Well, I am not prepared to preach a sermon  
that leaves us afraid and still trying to sneak away  
from that nasty subject of crucifixion.  
That would not be Good News for today,  
and I am convinced that God's Word to the beloved community  
is *always* a Word of grace.

So let's stick with it  
and look for the grace.

As Westerhoff says,  
"Jesus is not giving crazy instruction that makes no sense,  
or damning instruction that, like the brass ring, eludes our grasp.  
Jesus promises us his presence:  
*I have come to serve. I am with you. Do as I do.  
This is the way you were created to live—  
face to face with each other and face to face with me.  
It is the only way. I will show you how.  
I will serve you with my death for you. It is enough.*"

We encounter the shadows of death on a daily basis.  
That is the human situation.  
Some days are easier than others,  
but we all know the myriad forms that suffering takes:  
the broken relationship, the lost job, the life-threatening illness, the depleted  
bank account, the sags and wrinkles of encroaching old-age, the global  
realities of hunger and disease and war, the runaway teen, the shattered  
dreams.....  
I could go on.  
But I don't need to, do I?  
We all know the pain and inevitability of life's shadow side.  
And, in our own ways, we try to navigate and manage those hard things.  
Maybe there is grace in simply naming the truth of that shadow side.

But Jesus' words in this gospel reading take us further than that.  
Deeper.  
Because he is talking about a way of living *into* the crucified life.  
He's not saying only that life can be tough.  
He is calling us, as his followers,  
to be willing to go the distance for the sake of the kingdom.

Just as he goes the distance—  
speaking truth to the powers of empire and oppression and injustice  
until they cannot stand to hear him anymore  
and hoist him up on a cross on a hill....  
until he's good and dead and has stopped talking.

It's the mystery of our faith—  
this strange off-putting story of a sacrificial death  
that affects and shapes our conversion  
and somehow leads us into resurrection living  
even in the midst of the shadows and demons that surround us.

Frank Honeycutt, an author I return to again and again  
in my own struggles of formation as a Jesus follower,  
says that "a principal aim of the Christian community...  
is to prepare a disciple to live in an uncertain world  
with holy confidence and daring  
born of God's unfailing grace."

We are not in this alone.

We are never alone.

We have the promised presence of the Christ with us  
and we have each other.

Maybe that's why that New Creed resonates so deeply and strongly for us.

*We are not alone. God is with us. We trust in God.*

*We are called to be the church:*

*to celebrate God's presence; to live with respect in Creation;*

*to love and serve others; to seek justice and resist evil;*

*to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.*

*We are not alone....we are not alone. Thanks be to God.*

Conversion is a lifelong journey.

Growing into discipleship takes time.

It's like an apprenticeship,

in which we watch Jesus and learn from him as we go.

Jesus invites us to see the world through his eyes.

He doesn't mince words

and he doesn't sugar-coat the truth.

We can count on Jesus to say it like it is.

And the way it is for Jesus

is a life of self-giving that leads to crucifixion—

a crucifixion that exposes the powers of death that hold us captive  
and envisions another reality from the one we have learned to function in.

There is no skipping past crucifixion and self-sacrifice.  
There are powers of death at work in this world.  
the time of God's realm has not yet fully come;  
    in fact, there are times when we have trouble seeing  
    little sparks and glimpses even now.  
But we are called to stand up to the powers—  
    together and in the strength of holy Spirit who gives us  
    a different kind of power,  
the power to be vulnerable, to love when the cost is high,  
    to be *for* our neighbour  
    even when our neighbour is not *for* us,  
    to stand straight and walk forward  
        even when the shadow of a cross looms ahead.

Christian writer Gilbert Meilaender maintains that  
    the best advice parents can offer their children is this:  
*My child, the world is always a dangerous and threatening place  
    where death surrounds us.*  
*When I brought you for baptism, I acknowledged  
    that I could not possibly guarantee your future.*  
*I handed you over to the God who loves you  
    and with whom you are safe in both life and death.*  
*There is no security to be found elsewhere,  
    certainly not from me or those like me.*  
*Live with courage, therefore, and, if it must be,  
    do not be afraid to die in the service of what is good and just.*

Follow me, says Jesus.  
I know the real story.  
I see God's dream for creation  
    and that dream is going to come true.  
We won't get there by conventional means, but—  
    and you're going to have to trust me on this—  
    I will be with you all the way.  
Thanks be to God!