

It Isn't Supposed to Be Easy
Mark 8:27-38
Colebrook Congregational Church
September 13, 2015 / Ordinary 24

The lectionary has been following Mark, the Gospel with jazz hands, and going from last week to this week, there is a jump in the narrative. Why it is skipped over after the interaction with the Syrophenician woman and the healing of a deaf man, is actually understandable. Chapter Eight starts off with Jesus miraculously feeding another four thousand people in the desert, an argument about the Pharisees and Herod, and then the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida. We have already heard similar things. It did raise the question for me, why the repetition in a gospel known for being pithy and rushing toward the crucifixion? I am not sure, the only thing I can think of is, repetition is technique in education, so maybe it is to help the hearers remember the narrative.

And on the other side of this week's narrative is the beginning of Chapter Nine with the Transfiguration of Jesus.

Well, this week's selection has Jesus and the Disciples on the road from Bethsaida; of which there are two towns in ancient Israel with that name, but they were both on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, the larger of the two smaller seas north of the Dead Sea; and they were heading toward Caesarea Phillipi, which is farther north, in the Golan Heights. Today, hardly anyone lives there, it is called Baniyas, and is primarily an archaeological site with extensive ruins.

While on that road up into the mountains, Jesus asked them who do they think He is? As usual, the Disciples give a bunch of wrong answers, but then Peter gives the right one. He says that Jesus is the Messiah. And like so often in Mark, once the Disciples get it, Jesus tells them to keep it a secret.

Now that Jesus knows that the Disciples understand who He is, He knows that they can bear to hear of His upcoming suffering. This is the first time in the narrative order that Jesus foretells of His death and suffering.

Then Peter rebukes Jesus, and Jesus responds with similar words He used

when He was tempted in the Wilderness. Get thee behind me, Satan! Now “Satan” is considered the name of the Devil, but in the original Hebrew context it means Adversary, and it was a title based on an adjective, not a proper noun as it is today. In the Old Testament, The Satan was usually depicted as one of God's Angels, who was acting like God's prosecuting attorney.

The rest of Jesus' response reminds us that there are both human and divine concerns, two realms to consider things in. Do not bother with earthly things, but with divine things. He then invites the Disciples to follow Him, with the warning that following Him is not easy. There will be pain and suffering, and each person having their own cross to bear.

For the first three hundred years after the Death of Jesus, it was not a safe thing to be a Christian. Just being a follower of Jesus could mean your own death, and the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament was written down during that time period. After the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 315, Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity, giving Christians a safe haven, but Christians were still targeted throughout history. Even in our own modern era. There was the Armenian Genocide in Turkey during the First World War. Suppressions by Communists in the Soviet Union and still ongoing in China. While I was a Chaplain at Hartford Hospital, one of the Catholic priests was from Ethiopia, and he talked about how churches were targeted and burned down.

On a more positive note, I was happy to hear about how, in the Jerusalem area, the site of so much historic religious strife, many of the Abrahamic faithful are saying no to the easy way of violence and standing up to do a more difficult thing. On holy days, when one faith is celebrating, the followers of the other two faiths protect them. So, on Christmas and Easter, while Christians are worshiping in the Churches of the Nativity and the Holy Sepulchre, Jews and Muslims form a human shield around them. And then Christians do the same at the Wailing Wall and the Mosques. It would be easier to just bunker down at home, it is safer, but instead they do the Christian thing, and put themselves between others and harm.

We are lucky in this country, to have the Freedom of Religion, where people are safe to follow any faith or no faith without the fear that so many of our fellow humans endure throughout the world. Because of this safety, it can be harder to see what Jesus is talking about when he mentions having a cross to bear. While in context, to many Christians who are not in safe places, it means something different than it would us, who do not have to worry about persecution. The crosses we bear are going to be quite different.

Jesus is telling us that every Christian should expect to endure hardships, that they each have a cross to bear. Also that we should focus on the divine things. When I hear that, I think about how Jesus Calls us to serve one another, and how in doing so, we serve Jesus. That is a divine thing. Doing the Christian thing is the more difficult option in most situations.

In many cases, doing the Christian thing can be difficult. When someone in the steampunk art community made Theresa cry, I am ashamed to admit that my reaction was un-Christian. In that moment I felt it had to be done, but in retrospect, like with most things, I wished I handled things better, following the divine things rather than surrendering to human things.

Jesus tells us that if we are able we must help those whom we meet who are need. The passage from James last week said the same thing in no uncertain terms. However, there are so many scammers out there, and it is human nature to not want to be tricked or taken advantage of, so we put ourselves on guard. When I was first in Worcester, I was approached by someone who claimed that they were short for a train ticket back home to Boston. I gave him a couple dollars. A few days later, I happened to see the same guy just waltzing down the street. I told my teammates about this, and learned that the common scam in town was for people to approach those with out of state plates, and give a sob story about needing a ticket to Boston or Framingham. I was recently in Worcester for a Steampunk Meetup and someone, seeing my Connecticut plates, tried the same scam on me! Anyway, a few weeks later, that same guy approached me again! I really wanted to react in an un-Christian way to him for attempting to scam me. But I couldn't. I told him how I recognized him, I expressed concern for his wayward traveling, I explained the economics and logistics of buying roundtrip tickets, and then

topped it off by noting how I would like to go to Boston anyway, so I could just give him a ride. He declined and ran off.

A lot of times, it is easier to just ignore a situation and move on. But we cannot, we are Called to a more difficult road. If we see someone in need, and are able to help, then we must. We risk being tricked, being scammed, being taken advantage of. It is hoped that we can recognize the difference, without becoming jaded to all who cross our path who are in need. We must set aside the human things, focus on the divine things, and do the Christian thing in every situation. That is the cross we must bear.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

[PAUSE]

Creator God, you call us to love and serve You with body, mind, and spirit through loving your creation and our sisters and brothers. Open our hearts in compassion and receive our thanksgivings and petitions on behalf of our church, our community, and the world.

We thank You for Your blessings, and for the lessons You teach us. We thank You for those You have sent to help us in our daily lives. And we thank You for the opportunities to serve You through serving others, seeing to their needs.

We pray for the forgiveness of our missteps. We pray for your guidance to live our lives in more loving ways.

We pray for those who are unwell of mind, of body, or of spirit. We pray for their recovery, we pray for their caregivers, and we pray that you move us to help them in any way our gifts allow. We pray for those who are lost, so that they may find guidance. We pray for those who protect us, please keep them safe as they have kept us safe. And we pray that you help us to be instruments of your divine love.

We are reminded of all in world who need our prayers. We pray for the refugees around the world, especially from Syria and North Africe, please see them to safer places, and we give thanks to those who provide them shelter. We pray for those who are enduring drought, famine, and a lack of basic necessities. We pray for the oppressed. We pray for all to have a safe place.

We especially pray for:

Hear our prayers, both spoken and unspoken, the prayers of our hearts. And free us from the grip of distractions, that we may be of service to others in your name in our lives. Amen

Mark 8:27-38

8:27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

8:28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

8:29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

8:30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

8:31 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.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 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."

8:34 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.

8:35 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.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

8:38 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."