

“A Hard Thing to Hear”

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Mark 8:31-38

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.

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

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.”

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. **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. **36** For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? **37** Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

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.”

A HARD THING TO HEAR

Jesus, referring to himself as the Son of Man said,

“I will undergo great suffering.
I will be rejected by the religious leaders.

I will be killed.
And after three days I will rise again.”

Jesus didn't try to hide the details
of his passion and resurrection.
In fact, he said this quite openly, so all could hear.

Jesus was not always so open.

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today,
Jesus asks the disciples an important question.
“Who do you say that I am?”

And Peter says, “You are the Messiah.”
If ever there was a message
to be shouted from the roof tops,
you would think that this was it.

But, no.

Jesus does not want the disciples to be open about this important fact.

The Scripture says that he
“*sternly* warned them not to tell anyone about him.”
He told them in no uncertain terms not to spread the fact that he was the
Messiah.

In Mark's gospel the disciples (and the reader) are asked to hold in tension
a painful truth.

Jesus is the Messiah, but he is also the Son of Man who must suffer, be re-
jected, killed
....and only then rise again.

That's a hard thing to hear.

We understand.
Have you ever had to deliver some really bad news?
I have. It comes with the job.

I really love being a pastor,
but one thing I absolutely hate is having to deliver really bad news.

No matter how hard you try to soften the blow,
the words never come out right.

NO, NO, NO!

A pastor told of one such event in which a couple was killed in a car accident.

She decided that she needed to just say what happened in a straightforward way.

“I’m sorry, but your friends have been killed in a car accident.”

And the woman replied,
“No, no, no. It can’t be.
They’re not dead. No, no, no!”

There are some things that are just hard to hear.
In fact, for a while at least,
we just refuse to believe it.

I remember the president’s chief of staff,
General John Kelly talking with the press corps about what happens when
a soldier dies in combat.

He recounted in great detail
what happens to the body,
and how it was returned to the states.

In particular he talked about the chaplain going to the home of the fallen
soldier early in the morning,
and as he put it in his clipped military fashion, “proceeds to break their
heart.”

The normally contentious press corps
was quiet.

This was a man who lost his own son in combat.

And now he was speaking quite openly about things most of us would rather not know.

I think that's what was going on with Peter.
When confronted with the hard reality of the cross,
Peter wants to soften the blow.

Like always, Peter doesn't know what to say.
But, like always...
that doesn't stop him from talking!

He takes Jesus aside and says,

"No, no, no.

Don't say that.
We don't want to hear it."

TEMPTATION

But, Jesus will not give in to Peter's wishes.

More than that,
Jesus even says that Peter's desire to hush up all this talk of a cross,
was the work of Satan.

In fact, Jesus actually called Peter,
one of the first disciples to follow him by the name Satan!

Last week we talked about the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

And we noted that in Mark's gospel we get no detailed account of how he
was tempted.

Mark just tells us he was tempted by Satan
...for forty days he was tempted.

But, this passage gives us some insight
into how temptation can come.

Peter tempted Jesus to reject the way of the cross.
This temptation comes from one who is close to Jesus.

This temptation comes from one who just wants to shield Jesus (and himself) from a brutal reality.

But, there will be no resurrection
without the way of the cross.

There will be no Easter
if we do not have Lent and Holy Week.
It's all one message.

The apostle Paul wrote
in his first letter to the Corinthians,

“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,
we are of all people most to be pitied.”
(1 Corinthians 15:19)

Peter's hope was limited to this life only.
He had (as Jesus put it) set his mind on human things instead of divine things.

He heard the message of the cross and said
“No, no, no.”

RESURRECTION

But, that was only half the message.

What Peter didn't hear
was the message of the resurrection.

What Peter didn't hear was
God's eternal “yes”.

We could forgive Peter
for not hearing that message.

After all, at this time,
no one had ever heard of resurrection before.

But, what about us?

We have heard the good news of resurrection.
That news has been with us for a long time now.

And yet, do we, like Peter,
often set our minds on human things instead of divine things?

Do we worry too much about the cross,
and think too little about the resurrection?

A HARD TRUTH FOR EVERYONE

Jesus now turns to the crowd.
And he gives the crowd
as well as his disciples,
an even harder truth.

Jesus will not be the only one to sacrifice.
Sacrifice will also be required of his followers.

Jesus told them,
"If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

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."

Can you imagine how shocking
this message must have been?

This message is still shocking.

How can we be "successful" while preaching a message of self-denial and sacrifice?

Doesn't fit in with modern church growth strategies!
Too hard to hear!

Preach that message pastor,
and you will have a big drop off in attendance!

But, notice what Jesus actually says to the crowd.
The way of the cross,
the way of self-sacrifice
...is not optional.

It is for everyone who wants to follow Jesus.

So how do we respond to Jesus when he gives us news that is hard to hear?

We know that before the journey to the cross is over,
everyone will turn away.

Even Jesus' closest disciples will fail.
The cross was just too hard to bear.

And that's still true.
After all these years,
the message of Lent is still hard to hear.

The songs of Lent are minor and melancholy.

We would rather hear a different message.
We would rather sing a happier song.

Like Peter we say,

"Yes, Jesus I want to follow you.

But, can we put away all this talk of a cross?
Too depressing."

But, if we do not talk about the cross,
if we do not have the hard conversation about sin and sacrifice,

...the twin temptations of indifference
and denial will invade our life.

INDIFFERENCE

This past week I ran across a famous poem by that title, "Indifference."

It was written by a Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy.
He served bravely as a chaplain during World War I.

After the war he became a strong voice for the social gospel in England.

He wrote the poem to critique the treatment of the poor in Birmingham England.

(As an aside, I also found a post from someone who lives in Birmingham, Alabama who found the poem just as powerful and applicable for the place where he lives. And I suspect it applies to the place where we live as well.)

Anyway, the poem goes,

"When Jesus came to Golgotha
They hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet,
And made a Calvary.

They crowned Him with a crown of thorns;
Red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days,
And human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham,
They simply passed Him by;
They never hurt a hair of Him,
They only let Him die.

For men had grown more tender,
And they would not give Him pain;
They only just passed down the street,
And left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, 'Forgive them,
For they know not what they do.'
And still it rained the winter rain
That drenched Him through and through.

The crowds went home and left the streets
Without a soul to see;
And Jesus crouched against a wall
And cried for Calvary."

There's more than one way to crucify a Savior.
Indifference may be the worst way of all.

And the cure for sin of indifference is to face the hard truth of the cross in
our own lives.

SINGING THE BLUES

I've been taking online guitar lessons these past few weeks. It's a lot of
fun.

I get to sample different styles of playing the guitar
at my own pace.

And this week I've started some lessons on the playing the Blues, from a
guy named Hawkeye Herman.

Before Hawkeye began teaching, he gave a brief history of the Blues. He
said that the Blues began as a song style of enslaved African Americans.

When they were working
and when they were worshipping they would sing.
And they often would sing about their troubles.

Oddly enough ...
this would give them a sense of hope.

By expressing their anguish in song,
by singing about those things that were hard to hear,
they were able to connect with the promise of salvation.

This original American music form is reflected in
bluegrass, country, rock ... you name it.
You can even hear it in some of the anthems that our choir sings.

I think it's healthy for all of us to "sing the blues".

We need to find some way to express the anguish and disappointment in
our own life.

We need some way to talk
about our own road to the cross.

Happy, "clappy" religion...
will always be more popular.

But, it will never be more faithful
...or ultimately helpful.

And that's why we have the discipline of Lent.
Lent forces us to sing the blues.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday
by forcing us to think about a really hard truth,
our own mortality.

Ashes are imposed on our head
in the shape of a cross.

And the minister or priest says,
"You are dust
...and to dust you shall return."

Talk about a hard message to hear
...that's a tough sell for sure.

And yet a declaration of our own mortality
is exactly what we need to hear.

DENIAL

People often get in trouble psychologically when they refuse to admit the pain in their life.

My favorite portrayal of this was actor Don Knotts.
Don played Barney Fife on the Andy of Mayberry show.

And he always played the same character.
He was extremely anxious.
But, he would never admit it.

“What? Me nervous. I’m not nervous!”
And all the while he would be bug eyed
and shaking like a leaf.

We laugh at that because we recognize our own tendency to hide how we really feel.

But, in real life...
I’ve found that this is no laughing matter.

We bury feelings deep inside
...to try and stay “in control”.

This causes us to avoid the pain of others
and our own pain.

Like Peter we say,
“No, no, no.”

We succumb to temptation,
and sometimes even promote denial in the lives of other people.

We sometimes call it the power of by positive thinking.

SUNDAY’S COMING

But, Jesus loves us too much to leave us this way.
He rebukes this evil temptation to deny the hard truth.

And he calls us together to hear the truth,
the whole truth...so help us God.

He speaks openly to us
about what we all want to deny.

But, he does not stop there.

He also speaks to us about resurrection.

When the pain of life causes us to shout,
"No, no, no."

The Savior comes and gently rebukes us.

It may be Good Friday in our lives.
Things may happen that tear down faith and hope.

But, that's not the whole story.

He reminds us.
Sunday's coming.
The Day of Resurrection.

During Lent we try to hold these two things in tension.

The cross and the resurrection.

And, when we begin to accept
this truth that is hard to hear,
when we lose our life, when we let it go,
a funny thing happens.

We find life.
We find salvation.
We find resurrection.

Once again, Jesus invites us to take that journey.

Amen.