

February 28, 2021
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Mark 8: 31-38
“From Suffering to Grace”



“There are times when each of us has to bear the unbearable. It may come as physical pain, illness, or emotional suffering of our own, of someone dear to us, or of other sentient beings. Can you respond to suffering without closing down and still keep your heart open? It seems almost instinctive to use your mind to protect your heart, to rationalize suffering to avoid the pain or discomfort.”¹ But that isn’t the path of enlightenment, as Jesus teaches Peter. Listen with me to these words from Mark’s gospel:

Then Jesus 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he [Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

³⁴He 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. 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.

May we hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Peter wants to deny suffering. We can’t really fault him. We want to also. We don’t want to hear our beloved ones tell us they are going to die. Denial is our natural response. We want to deny suffering of this world. We want to help others deny pain. We are uncomfortable around suffering. We want to make it go away.

The text says that Peter rebukes Jesus. ‘Rebuke’ is a powerful word. To rebuke means to criticize sharply, reprimand. But in the text here from first century Greek, rebuke means exorcise - as in drive out an evil spirit. Peter wants to exorcise suffering away from Jesus — drive out the suffering- because that’s what Peter wants. I can imagine Peter’s rebuke of Jesus something like:

What? suffer? die? Jesus, No! you can’t die. We can figure something out. We can avoid Jerusalem. We can go to India. Let’s travel east. Suffer, die? No Jesus. We have been following you. I left my family to be with you. I left my work. You are the One! You have to be. I’ve staked everything on you. No, you can’t talk like that. No no no. You’re going to be the Messiah, You’ll be the greatest king Israel has ever had. You can’t die. What would all this mean? We can’t survive without you...

Peter means well. It is what we say to our beloved when they announce their impending death.

¹ Ram Dass, *Polishing the Mirror*.

What? Wait? but have you gotten a second opinion..? What about a transplant? Maybe we could contact Mayo? I know someone who survived this... There has to be another way. No, no no, this can't be. I can't survive without you...

Peter responds as we respond to the news. Peter gives Jesus another teaching moment. The text says Jesus now takes his turn to rebuke Peter.

“Get behind me Satan!” he says. Again in Greek, first century word translation based on the ancient Hebrew is a different than modern notions. Satan isn't in red suit with pitch fork on our hot sauce bottle. HaSatan was the Deceiver. Jesus says,

Get behind me Deceiver. Take the Deceiver out of his dismissal of suffering. You are thinking like a human - “setting your thoughts on human things”. You are looking at it from your narrow mind perspective, of your own thinking. Step back Peter, and see. You'll see the truth. I've been offending the powerful, and they don't understand me. They are threatened by my new teachings of grace. They want to keep things as they have always been by the letter of the law. You are foolish if you don't see where this is going. They will kill me. Make no mistake; don't be deceived. It will happen. Suffering is inevitable in this life. If you really want to follow me, this is what it will mean, you too will take up your cross. If you try to save your life by denying the suffering in the world and by pretending it isn't real, by pushing it away, you will miss out on life. You will lose life. Only if you give up your deceptio , only if you see life as it is, only if you see yourself as you really are, only if you see suffering for what it is - an agent of transformation - only then will you truly gain life.

Now, I've heard this text be used to justify suffering. When someone falls on hard times, they say, ‘this is my cross to bear.’ When a woman is beaten by her lover, she shrugs and says, ‘this is my cross to bear.’ People fighting cancer, physical diseases, mental illness, somehow coming to terms with suffering by saying, ‘this is my cross to bear...’ When we lump all suffering into a justification, or we try to deny it all, we have missed the point Jesus is making here.

First of all, God does not send suffering upon anyone. God does not desire you to suffer. Jesus announces his mission is to proclaim release to the captives, recovery to those who can't see their way, freedom for those who are oppressed. Jesus spends much of his time relieving people of suffering, healing physical ills, and restoring those who are isolated from community. When Jesus sees people who are suffering he doesn't say, ‘hey that's just your cross to bear, suffer!’”

The suffering of the cross is the suffering one voluntarily takes up for the purpose of redemptive acts, to bring forth the kingdom of God for others and for all. There is not redeeming life purpose in abusive relationships or an agonizing illness. Jesus doesn't glorify suffering, but he doesn't deny death either. It is real. It is part of life. It is part of ordinary life, and it is especially part of life for those who are advocating for the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed.

When Jesus told his friends that he was headed into suffering and death, I wonder what he needed from them? What response might he have wanted to hear? What might have truly been a compassionate response to him? Certainly not denial of the reality he was facing.

There is suffering in the world. It is just because that's life. Jesus does not glorify suffering for sufferings sake. "cross to bear" isn't about abuse or society ills or oppression to endure silently, or to somehow stimulate your religious growth. There is suffering because there is life. We have our wants - our attachments - our desires. We want everything to go well. We want happiness and peace and euphoria. We want happily ever after we were promised as children. We want to be healthy, wealthy and wise. When life is other than what we want, we suffer.

Jesus tells of suffering that is inevitable - particularly when you challenge the powers that be - try to bring change. Jesus reminds us to step back and remember - remember the rest of the story. Jesus says to let go of our narrow thinking; don't set your mind on 'human things' Let go of our narrow thinking about the way things should be. Step back. See the bigger picture. Jesus has chosen his path, to continue proclaiming God's love for all - even if it angers those trying to keep things like they always have been. Jesus chose to live and to die to follow the way of Love. Jesus knows God is with us. He knows that suffering doesn't get the last word. He knows, that we shall overcome - not by avoiding, but allowing suffering to shine a light into places longing for transformation. We shall overcome - racism, sexism, poverty, and injustice not by hiding it, or pretending it didn't happen, or doesn't happen

but by going through it, by growing through it, by allowing the suffering to bring transformation. The path is to transform us individually into fully humans bearing the image of God. We are to become the heart of God, the compassion of God. The path of transformation is to transform us collectively into the beloved community of God's kin-dom where we take up the cross of God's love and bring forth the Love of God to all. Where we reach out to others who are suffering, to hear their suffering and sit with them through it without glossing it over or pretending it's okay or denying it is real. To suffer with is to hold one another, to bear with one another through the pains, and to remind one another of the compassion and grace that sees us through for we are not alone, in life , in death , in life beyond death, God is with us. transforming us.

May it be so.