

## Mark 8: 31-38

ONE COMMENTATOR I READ THIS WEEK WROTE IN RESPONSE TO OUR GOSPEL READING: “REALLY? ARE WE CHRISTIANS CRAZY? WHO IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WOULD FOLLOW A MAN WHO TELLS US TO PICK UP A CROSS AND FOLLOW HIM? REALLY? BUT THAT WAS NOT PART OF THE DEAL IN THE BEGINNING, YOU KNOW. OR WE DIDN’T THINK IT WAS.

FIRST, JESUS GETS BAPTIZED, AND THAT PART GOES REALLY WELL. THEN JESUS SPENDS TIME OUT IN THE WILDERNESS, BUT MARK’S GOSPEL DOES NOT DWELL MUCH ON THAT TIME. JESUS CALLS PETER, JAMES, JOHN AND ANDREW TO FOLLOW HIM AND THEY LEAVE THEIR FISHING NETS TO DO JUST THAT. NEXT COMES JESUS, MIRACULOUS HEALER, POWERFUL PREACHER. HE CASTS OUT DEMONS. HE TELLS PARABLES. CROWDS FOLLOW HIM. THIS IS ALL EXCITING! WHO WOULDN’T WANT TO GO ALONG FOR THIS KIND OF RIDE—ESPECIALLY IF YOU ARE PETER, JAMES, JOHN, ANDREW AND OTHERS WHO THINK THAT AT THE END OF THIS RIDE IS GLORY. THEY BELIEVE JESUS WILL OVERTHROW THE ROMAN GOVERNMENT AND SET THE JEWISH PEOPLE FREE.

AFTER ALL, JESUS HAS ASKED HIS DISCIPLES—JUST A FEW VERSES EARLIER---“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?” WHEN SIMON PETER SAYS “YOU ARE THE CHRIST,” WHICH MEANS “THE ANOINTED ONE,” JESUS TELLS THE DISCIPLES NOT TO TELL ANYONE.

NOW IN THE FIRST CENTURY JEWISH CULTURE, “THE ANOINTED ONE” THE MESSIAH, IS SOMEONE WHO IS COMMONLY UNDERSTOOD TO BE THE HERO WHO WILL COME WITH SUPER-HUMAN POWERS TO RESCUE THE PEOPLE. BUT ALL IS NOT SWEETNESS IN THIS JOURNEY WITH JESUS AND HERE MIDWAY THROUGH MARK’S GOSPEL, JESUS KNOWS THAT HE MUST CURE HIS DISCIPLE’S OWN BLINDNESS WITH SOME BLUNT TRUTH ABOUT SUFFERING AND DEATH.

MARK’S GOSPEL EMPHASIZES THAT JESUS HAS NOT CHOSEN A LIFE OF GLORY, OR POWER. NOR IS JESUS SOME KIND OF SUPER-MAN. INSTEAD, JESUS USES THE TERM “SON OF MAN,” A TERM FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOK OF DANIEL. IN CONTEMPORARY TERMS, WE COULD TRANSLATE THAT AS “THE HUMAN ONE.” SO JESUS WANTS HIS DISCIPLES TO UNDERSTAND THAT IF WE ARE TO LIVE MOST FULLY, WE MUST LEARN TO LIVE IN REAL AND AUTHENTIC WAYS---WHICH MEANS SUFFERING.

WHAT WOULD OUR LIVES LOOK LIKE IF WE LIVED AS FULLY AUTHENTIC HUMAN BEINGS? IF WE ARE HONEST, WE KNOW THAT IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO BE AUTHENTIC. OUR SOCIETY IS ONE THAT GLORIFIES LOOKS, MONEY, POWER, CONTROL. HOW DOES THIS AFFECT OUR PRACTICE OF OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH---OR DOES IT? JESUS TELLS US THAT WE CAN HAVE THE BEST OF WHAT SOCIETY OFFERS, YET LOSE OUR SOULS. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN ON A PRACTICAL LEVEL?

**IN PRIOR CONGREGATIONS I ALWAYS HAD A NUMBER OF FAMILIES WHOSE CHILDREN WERE REQUIRED TO ATTEND SUNDAY GAMES/TOURNAMENTS. HERE IS TENSION. IF YOU TELL A COACH THAT YOU CANNOT COME TO PRACTICE OR PLAY IN A GAME BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO GO TO CHURCH, YOU WILL EITHER GET LAUGHED AT, BENCHED, OR THROWN OFF THE TEAM. IS IT NOT IRONIC THAT ON A MICRO-LEVEL, TO PICK UP YOUR CROSS AND CARRY IT MEANS THAT YOU MUST NEGOTIATE THE TERMS OF WALKING YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY AND PRACTICING YOUR FAITH WITH PRACTICING A SPORT?**

**I'VE HAD GROWN ADULTS TELL ME THERE IS TENSION AT WORK WHERE THEIR FAITH IS CONCERNED. THEY CANNOT TALK ABOUT THEIR CHRISTIAN FAITH; IT'S OKAY TO ACT ETHICALLY, TO BE COMPASSIONATE, TO HAVE A SENSE OF PEACE ABOUT THEM. ISN'T IT IRONIC THAT ON A MICRO-LEVEL, TO PICK UP YOUR CROSS AND CARRY IT MEANS THAT YOU CANNOT TALK ABOUT YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY UNLESS SOMEONE EXPLICITLY ASKS ABOUT IT?**

**IN TODAY'S GOSPEL, JESUS MAKES IT VERY CLEAR THAT IF WE INTEND TO FOLLOW HIM, TO GO BEHIND HIM, TO GO WHERE HE GOES AND DO WHAT HE DOES, THEN OUR LIVES WILL INCLUDE SUFFERING AND REJECTION. NOT BEING ABLE TO TALK ABOUT OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH AT WORK OR COORDINATING SPORTS SCHEDULES WITH SUNDAY WORSHIP IS HARDLY A CATEGORY OF SUFFERING. SO WHAT DO WE, 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CHRISTIANS REALLY UNDERSTAND ABOUT SUFFERING?**

**ON FEB. 15, 2015, ISIS TERRORISTS LED 21 COPTIC CHRISTIANS ONTO A BEACH IN LIBYA. THEY FORCED THE MEN TO KNEEL. THE CAMERA PANNED SLOWLY DOWN THE LINE. ONLY ONE HAD ANY LOOK OF FEAR ON HIS FACE. THE OTHERS LOOKED RESIGNED, OR STOIC. ONE WAS MOVING HIS LIPS—PROBABLY IN PRAYER. AS THE CAMERA MOVED SLOWLY, ONE OF THE TERRORISTS RANTED ABOUT AMERICA AND OUR PRESIDENT. THEN THEY ORDERED THE 21 CHRISTIANS TO LIE FACE DOWN IN THE SAND. ONE BY ONE, THEY CUT THEIR THROATS, THEN CUT THEIR HEADS OFF. THE LAST SCENE ON THE VIDEO—WHICH WAS ENTITLED “TO THE NATION WITH THE CROSS”—WAS OF THE SURF. ALL OF THE WATER WAS BLOOD RED. 21 CHRISTIANS DIED BECAUSE THEY PROFESSED JESUS CHRIST AS LORD. THAT IS SUFFERING. THE PEOPLE WHO LOVED THESE MEN SUFFERED FROM GRIEF. WHERE ARE YOU AND I COMPARED TO THESE MEN?**

**YET THERE IS SUFFERING IN THIS WORLD. TO LIVE IS TO SUFFER. PERHAPS WHEN JESUS CALLS US TO GO WITH THE HUMAN ONE, THE SON OF MAN, HE IS TELLING US THAT TO BE FULLY HUMAN, WE MUST SUFFER ALONG WITH OTHERS. WE MUST HAVE COMPASSION. COMPASSION. “COM,” WHICH MEANS “TO LOVE TOGETHER WITH” HAS ROOTS IN LATIN. PASSION IS RELATED TO THE ENGLISH WORD “PATIENT” OR “ONE WHO SUFFERS.”**

THEREFORE, TO BE COMPASSIONATE IS TO LOVE TOGETHER WITH ONE WHO SUFFERS. COMPASSION IS RANKED AS A VIRTUE IN ALMOST ALL WORLD RELIGIONS.

WITH WHOM ARE WE CALLED TO SUFFER AS WE WALK THIS CHRISTIAN JOURNEY? IS THERE SOMEONE WHO IS DYING? COMPASSION. DOES SOMEONE GRIEVE THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE? COMPASSION. WE OPEN OUR HEARTS IN LOVE TO OTHERS WHO SUFFER.

TO BE *FULLY* HUMAN IS TO SEE BEYOND OURSELVES AND OUR OWN SUFFERINGS TO OTHERS. IT IS ALSO TO ALLOW SUFFERING TO TRANSFORM US IN SOME WAY.

THERE WAS ONE PERSON'S DECISION TO PICK UP A CROSS AND FOLLOW JESUS THAT WAS TRULY TRANSFORMATIONAL. IN 1960, THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY MAGAZINE ASKED DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. TO REFLECT ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF HIS SUFFERINGS: THIS WAS DR. KING'S RESPONSE: "DUE TO MY INVOLVEMENT IN THE STRUGGLE FOR THE FREEDOM OF MY PEOPLE, I HAVE KNOWN VERY FEW QUIET DAYS IN THE LAST FEW YEARS. I HAVE BEEN ARRESTED 5 TIMES AND PUT IN ALABAMA JAILS. MY HOME HAS BEEN BOMBED TWICE. A DAY SELDOM PASSES THAT MY FAMILY AND I ARE NOT RECIPIENTS OF THREATS OF DEATH. I HAVE BEEN THE VICTIM OF A NEAR FATAL STABBING. SO IN A REAL SENSE I HAVE BEEN BATTERED BY THE STORMS OF PERSECUTION. I MUST ADMIT THAT AT TIMES I HAVE FELT THAT I COULD NO LONGER BEAR SUCH A HEAVY BURDEN, AND HAVE BEEN TEMPTED TO RETREAT TO A MORE QUIET LIFE. BUT EVERY TIME SUCH A TEMPTATION APPEARED, SOMETHING CAME TO STRENGTHEN AND SUSTAIN MY DETERMINATION. MY PERSONAL TRIALS HAVE ALSO TAUGHT ME THE VALUE OF UNMERITED SUFFERING. AS MY SUFFERINGS MOUNTED I SOON REALIZED THERE WERE TWO WAYS I COULD RESPOND TO MY SITUATION: EITHER TO REACT WITH BITTERNESS OR SEEK TO TRANSFORM THE SUFFERING. I DECIDED TO FOLLOW THE LATTER COURSE. RECOGNIZING THE NECESSITY FOR SUFFERING I HAVE TRIED TO MAKE OF IT A VIRTUE. IF ONLY TO SAVE MYSELF FROM BITTERNESS, I HAVE ATTEMPTED TO SEE MY PERSONAL ORDEALS AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSFORM MYSELF AND HEAL THE PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE TRAGIC SITUATION. I HAVE LIVED THESE PAST FEW YEARS WITH THE CONVICTION THAT UNEARNED SUFFERING IS REDEMPTIVE.

THERE ARE SOME WHO STILL FIND THE CROSS A STUMBLING BLOCK, AND OTHERS CONSIDER IT FOOLISHNESS, BUT I AM MORE CONVINCED THAN EVER BEFORE THAT IT IS THE POWER OF GOD UNTO SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL SALVATION. SO LIKE THE APOSTLE PAUL I CAN NOW HUMBLY YET PROUDLY SAY, 'I BEAR IN MY BODY THE MARKS OF THE LORD JESUS.' THE SUFFERING AND AGONIZING MOMENTS THROUGH WHICH I HAVE PASSED OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE ALSO DRAWN ME CLOSER TO GOD. MORE THAN EVER BEFORE I AM CONVINCED OF THE REALITY OF A PERSONAL GOD."

*'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.'***

**BE FULLY HUMAN. WALK WITH OTHERS WHO SUFFER, AND KNOW THEIR HEARTS. IN YOUR OWN SUFFERING, CHOOSE NOT BE TO BITTER, BUT TO BE TRANSFORMED, EVEN WHEN YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT THAT WILL LOOK LIKE. KNOW THAT IN SUFFERING, JESUS GOES BEFORE YOU, AND HE GOES WITH YOU. AMEN.**