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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Mark 8:31-38

If Mom, Dad, and I were in the car for the better part of a day or so, on our way to Chicago or some place like that, and the radio was tuned to the oldies station for long enough, we'd inevitably end up hearing the song "Last Kiss," a 1965 hit for J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers. Personally, I never cared for the song, and neither did Dad. "Some pretty questionable theology in there," he'd always say.

Theologically speaking, the song was most "questionable" in the chorus, which, if you're a baby boomer, you would immediately recognize...

Oh where, oh where can my baby be?
The good Lord took her away from me!
She's gone to heaven, so I've got to be good,
So I can see my baby when I leave this world.

I would say that Dad's appraisal of the song's theology as questionable was quite generous -- horrible would be more like it!

First of all, there's the image of God plucking a loved one out of a person's hand; God doesn't operate that way. Think of how hard it would be to love a God who was like that, who randomly "zapped" people just because he could! There is absolutely no sound biblical or theological basis for such a line of thinking; in fact, we read in Lamentations 3, verse 33 that the Lord "does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone."

Secondly, the idea that if I'm a good boy, I'll get to see my baby when I leave this world is completely out of sync with all of Christianity's teachings about how one inherits eternal life.

Being saved isn't a matter of being a good boy or girl; God won't reward you with a trip to heaven because you behaved well during your earthly life! Rather, salvation is granted to those who look to the cross and find their sins forgiven and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

To think of salvation coming to us any other way is to empty the cross of its meaning. Why bother with all that messy "cross stuff" if we can get to heaven simply by being good boys and girls? Well, if Jesus would've had a different way in mind, wouldn't he have said so? Today's Gospel text from Mark finds Jesus making the first of three predictions regarding the end of his earthly life. And it's obvious that this end won't be anything along the lines of an old man falling asleep one night and not getting up the next morning -- peaceful and full of years. No, what Jesus foretells is the Passion, that time in which he shall stand before the authorities and be given a cross and crown of thorns and proceed to the Place of the Skull.

The text says, "[Jesus] began to teach [the disciples] 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" (Mark 8:31). Of the many things Jesus said that simply went flying over the disciples' heads, this is one of the big ones! Peter, in particular, cannot conceive of how this would

be possible or even desirable (8:32b).

In retrospect, it's easy to think of the disciples as rather stupid because of their failure to catch on to what Jesus was saying. If any of us were around during that time, we might've found ourselves a bit puzzled by Jesus talking about his impending death. Would we have realized that the priestly sacrifices of ancient Judaism were a prelude to the One who would become both priest and sacrifice? Would we have figured out that, like the priest's sacrifice, Jesus would sacrifice himself for our sins? Add to this the fact that we all would've likely been illiterate, and it would quickly become evident that -- theologically, at least -- we wouldn't have had a clue as to what Jesus meant to us or to the world!

Thus, all the language that we use today pertaining to Jesus -- redemption, reconciliation, atonement, etc. -- wouldn't have been connected with Jesus at all in the disciples' minds. Yes, they found someone who would be a good teacher and guide, but they never would've thought of Jesus as someone who would die for their sins! Jesus' sharp rebuke of Peter is an indication that Peter (and, presumably, the rest of the disciples) are way off base from what Jesus' actual mission is to be.

And, if just for the sake of hearing those famous words again, allow me to repeat Jesus' rebuke -- "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33b).

Hmmm. So what are those "divine things"? One cannot help but

think that Jesus dying for the sins of many and that this death will restore humanity's relationship with God are a few of those "divine things". And what about the seemingly twisted logic of having someone basically go and have himself defeated in order to accomplish something good? Had I been a disciple, I wouldn't have thought it made much sense for my teacher to go have himself killed. Simply put, the disciples, in Jesus' time, were unable to see the big picture. As Jesus repeatedly suggested, it will only make sense after it has all happened.

The concept of a person being redeemed by Jesus' blood is one that seems so natural to longtime Christians that one wouldn't think to question it. In fact, were a Christian to say that there was another way to be redeemed -- say, through good works -- then that person would be accused of speaking falsely. (Heresy is the term that would traditionally be applied to something like that.) And when we are confronted with things that we don't understand, we might say some pretty stupid things...just like the disciples. But, you see, redemption became real for them, too.

Judas? Well, that's a different story.

As for our friends J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers, maybe their contribution of bad theology to the world of popular music was little different from Peter's misconstrual of Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death. Peter must've had in his mind the way he wanted things to be, which didn't really correspond too well with the itinerary that Jesus put forth. Likewise, the grieving boyfriend who lamented "Oh where, oh where can my baby be" probably

had his mind on human things like enjoying the company of a loved one...and not on divine things like Jesus opening the door to eternal life through the cross.

And yet, to do as our protagonist does in our 1965 teen tragedy hit and really believe that being a good boy or girl will mean a guaranteed eternity with our loved ones...well, that's still wrong! One cannot taste eternity apart from the cross, and to assume, no matter how innocently, that one can be rewarded simply for good behavior is to make a mockery of the cross. Jesus was quite clear about where he'd end up, and that there would be no exceptions. We need to, correspondingly, be quite clear as to where our salvation comes from, and sing our songs (when allowed), pray our prayers, preach our sermons, and read our Scriptures thus informed.

We need not let the seemingly twisted logic of a Savior dying on a cross twist us up too much!

The only bad theology is that which bypasses the cross altogether. But, one could argue, that's what Peter wanted and, more broadly, that's our human inclination in a nutshell. Think about this, though: When we see not only how Jesus died but also who Jesus died for, it starts to make sense. He died for us and for our salvation. Human things? Well, we just want to have things as wonderful as we remember them. Divine things? They're different...now we might have to envision how wonderful, according to God's plan, things will be.

But the cross is always a part of that plan. Now, during this sea-

son of Lent, come and see how the cross will become a part of
you...

Amen.