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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19)  
September 12, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Mark 8:27-38

Let's attempt, for a moment, to get into the heads of everyone involved in the Gospel of Mark...including Mark the Evangelist himself. There was Jesus, who taught and proclaimed. There were the disciples, who followed and learned. And there was Mark, who gave us an account of it all -- an account that actually served as a basis for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, as well.

One overwhelming assumption that was in people's heads back in Mark's time was that the end of the world was near. Of course, that seems rather strange to us when we hear this -- what are we supposed to do besides say "Yup, we're still here"? Texts, like those just read, will be "heard" quite differently because our perception of reality is drastically different than those of the earliest eyewitnesses and documenters. So when Jesus talks about taking up one's cross and suffering for the sake of the gospel, he is most likely not referring to a virtually endless, decades-long suffering in a solitary, poor, nasty and brutish existence, to borrow some choice adjectives from philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

Focusing particularly on verses 34 through 38 of this morning's text, one might note a tendency to reduce the Christian life down to the simple maxim of "if you want to be with Jesus in the next life, you must suffer for him in this life." And certainly,

Christianity has quite a colorful history of a sort of masochism that used texts like this one to justify such masochism. Think of the generations of monks and nuns who tortured themselves in pursuit of their Lord. Think, too, of the multitudes of peasants who were simply told to accept their miserable lot in life because it was the way of the cross. If you were in their shoes, would you want to hear pious piffle like "Your reward will be in heaven"? No! You'd be thinking, "Well, a fat lot of good that does us now!"

Perhaps a more responsible way to interpret this text would be to take another look at the realities of its time. The "adulterous and sinful generation" to which Jesus refers is likely the decadent and tyrannical government of the Roman Empire, as well as the lifeless and unresponsive leadership of the Jewish religion. Those of whom Jesus will be "ashamed" are these types of people who did not heed his words. That's obvious. But now the question of what does this mean for us is back on our side of the court. Are we a persecuted minority awaiting the imminent end of time? Um...I don't think so. Should we use language of taking up the cross as a justification for self-mutilation, or, worse yet, a passive acceptance of injustice? Most certainly not! Yes, we still have a bit of work to do for this text to make sense in our lives today...

What if we saw taking up the cross as the pursuit of justice and freedom rather than the passive acceptance of injustice and op-

pression? This seems like a project better suited for the long run...much unlike the short term sticking-it-out until the end of time that was likely the prevailing mindset in the Gospel of Mark. Yes, these words of Scripture were written in a different time and had a different meaning back then, but their truth holds up whenever we prayerfully, carefully, and thoughtfully consider their meaning for us today.

Taking up the cross may, indeed, be making life better for others rather than making life miserable for yourself. That would be the aforementioned "pursuit of justice and freedom." We often don't consider how real our Christian calling is within our community and wider world. As that pertains to what we can do, we can readily see how justice and freedom are qualities of the livable life. If you don't have a job and jobs are terribly scarce, you're probably not experiencing a lot of justice and freedom; instead, you are captive to the injustices of inadequate resources and insufficient time.

Today, one can turn this scenario the other way around. As a frequent diner in our local restaurants, I hear often of how short-staffed these places are. How captive are they, too, to the injustices of inadequate resources and insufficient time?

But still, the cross calls people who endeavor to provide opportunity for you. This isn't merely someone telling you to pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Instead, we continue to invest in job development, and support, for example, our local schools,

businesses, and healthcare facilities. As we think about working for justice and freedom, providing jobs and improving the standard of living in our community are two ways in which people are putting their faith into action. Thanks be to God for all that has been done in these areas!

Getting even closer to home -- to St. Anne's Episcopal Church -- we face occasional uncertainty as to the time and resources we have for mission. Sure, the church is ideally an agent of justice and freedom, too. Thus, taking up the cross means outreach to those who are hungry, homeless, persecuted, and rejected. I am most thankful for the robust tradition at St. Anne's of outreach and hospitality, because then I don't have to harp on that in my sermons! Nevertheless, I continue to encourage you to be mission-oriented, because when you stop being mission-oriented, you focus only on paying the bills, paying me (or my successor), and keeping the doors open. Those things take faithfulness, too, but that kind of faithfulness doesn't have much of a ripple effect outside the doors of the church, because there's no ability to do mission in an organized way.

Think, as well, of how we're not obligated to do things the way we've always done them forever. Taking up the cross means -- yes -- commitment, but what if we thought about situations and places in which we might be able to do that more healthily and faithfully? Regardless of our accomplishments, we still have a very fundamental impulse to save ourselves. This is understandable, but

not faithful. Christian duty, as far as I can articulate it, means doing what the Lord calls us to do rather than doing what we want to do. Jesus clearly tells us the blessings of the former, and the consequences of the latter; he says, "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" (Mark 8:35).

So, let's talk about the blessings instead of the consequences. In giving ourselves over to the Lord and taking up his cross, we receive blessings far beyond measure. Put simply, the more you give, the more you get. Think less of your worldly commitment than of the total and self-sacrificing love that your Lord poured out for you and for all humanity on the cross. See Christ and his cross in all that you do rather than all the things of this life that are finite and temporary. See how, by embracing Christ's sacrifice, you can let go of that which is finite and temporary. See the possibilities ahead in a life of Christian commitment that flourishes outside the walls of this place as well as in here.

A former bishop of mine was fond of quoting Colossians 1:17 -- "in [Christ] all things hold together." For him, it was a way of illustrating that when Christ is between you and your neighbor, all things do, indeed, hold together. Modifying that idea a bit, we can now say that through the cross, all things hold together. When people reflect the sort of Christ-like commitment as exemplified (but never duplicated) in the cross, there won't be any

problem holding things together. Even in those times when the future looks bleak, it might be that the cross has fallen out of the picture, or, more severely, that faith itself has fallen out of the picture. Faith can see possibilities when we're glued to limitations, which are mostly our misguided desires and attachments.

Yes, where there is faith, grounded in the cross, there is Christ, and Christ-like people who love and serve their neighbor. Whenever you say "it won't work," the Gospel turns around and reminds you, "it can!"

Sure, we're not in the same state of mind of those who heard and recorded Jesus' preaching and teaching; we require a theology and practice that sustains us for the long run instead of getting us by until the imminent end of time. Nor do people -- especially suffering people -- need a patronizing preacher to tell them that their suffering is an unchangeable lot in life that's preparing them for some faraway blessedness. No, the Gospel contains something better than that, I think. It contains good news for those who struggle and demands action from those who are privileged. People are hungry for, yes, ways to help them live their lives; let me say that taking up your cross may not sound very fashionable, but it works.

Just ask people who have "lost" their lives in Jesus Christ what they've found. You'll hear things like peace, forgiveness, love, and commitment. I trust you've already found the same. May your lives be filled with more. Amen.