

First Sunday in Lent, February 18, 2018

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

Steps to Take at a Crossroads

Mark 8:27-9:1

INTRODUCTION

The first half of the gospel of Mark describes Jesus' Ministry in the region of Galilee. He teaches, heals, and amazes the crowds. There have been a few conflicts with the religious authorities, but for the most part, people have been impressed with his message and his practice of the Reign of God.

Now, as Bob pointed out last Sunday, in the middle of the book, at the 8th and 9th chapters, the tone shifts in some significant ways: Jesus asks the disciples to come to grips with his identity, and he introduces the idea that his identity as the Messiah will include suffering and even death. The good news of God's salvation will not be good news to those in power, and even Jesus' closest disciples have trouble with this new direction.

THE READING

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?'²⁸ And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'²⁹ He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 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.'

¹And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

SERMON

Since moving to Houghs Neck in September, Steve and I have taken walks around the area to get acquainted with our new home by foot. As happens when you are new to a place, you can walk down one known street and come upon an entirely different, unknown road – the kind that you don't know where it goes, whether if you take it, it will bring you back, and how long following it might take. You're at a crossroads, and going forward requires a greater commitment.

"Crossroads" can also be a figurative term. For instance, when your business plan begins to reach a critical customer mass, or your non-profit gathers enough clout in the community, you find yourself at a crossroads – one that probably requires a bump up in capital or organization. A health issue that throws you for a loop can be a crossroads, calling you to make unforeseen decisions. In a marriage relationship, one spouse may surprise the other, saying: "I think we need to go to counseling." If so, you're at a crossroads. Church programs, even when they are popular and growing, reach a stage where they need evaluation and change. Confirmation students know what it is to stand at an intersection of faith and commitment.

Lent is a crossroads kind of season in the church year. It is a 40-day spiritual journey designed to make us pause, reflect, and take a walk down the road from the cradle to the cross. In so going, Lent calls us to a deeper commitment.

The first "Lent," if you will, arguably begins in Mark at chapter 8, verse 27, just prior to the "tipping point" of the Transfiguration, which Bob dealt with last Sunday. Up to this point in the Gospel, the identity of Jesus has been kept under wraps, but with his question to the Disciples – "Who do you say that I am?" – Peter goes out on a limb and "outs" him as God's anointed – "the Messiah." It's a crossroads of faith for him.

This little band of believers also finds themselves on the Northern border in the region called Caesarea Philippi, standing on the foothills of what are now known as the Golan Heights, a site from which they can look back over where they have been in Galilee, and look across, all the way south to Jerusalem, where Jesus intends the Movement to go.¹ They were standing at a geographical crossroads.

Moreover, Jesus paints a shocking picture of the future, saying that their mission trip will ultimately bring him through conflict, rejection, suffering, and death before there is any

¹Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1983), 151.

kind of resurrection! Things had been going so well for them all; the crowds were growing. So this is a startling shift to the disciples' expectations. It's like saying: "the grass is purple," because Jesus' followers had learned during their own "confirmation" and religious upbringing that the Messiah would save the nation by military might, overthrow the occupiers and re-establish a reign of peace and justice. Thus, hearing from him about the road of violence and abuse against Jesus just did not compute.

Peter particularly found this course unthinkable and tried to protect his friend through harsh protest! Our instinct, too, in our "pain killer culture,"² would be to object, or at least hold our hands over our ears, saying, "I can't hear you!" If the disciples represent the proverbial chicken crossing the road to get to the other side, they, by contrast, do not want to cross!

About seven years into my ministerial tenure at University Christian Church in Seattle, WA, I began to take some of the leaders aside and tell them what they already knew in their gut, that, while we were doing excellent ministry together, the church was not rebounding from its slow numerical decline and had even more intentional work to do to reverse the trajectory and remain relevant and viable. There were some denying-Peters in the pews, but mostly, standing at this particular juncture, the congregation remained strangely quiet when they heard this. They didn't know what to do with this information. It took about a year, I kid you not, before I heard my own words come back to me from the lips of the laity.

In the case of Jesus' disciples, he tells them the exact same message about the future in chapters 9 and 10 as he just has in chapter 8, and their silence must have felt to him like when your Mac stalls, and that swirling, infinity color-wheel appears! I get it; it takes time to process such a message, to receive information that contradicts your desires, and it's uncomfortable to be at a crossroads of commitment!

Then, like a coach to an Olympic athlete, Jesus proposes steps of discipline that will get the disciples to the goal. He instructs them to lose their lives to find them, to deny themselves to be fulfilled, and to take up their cross instead of running from risks, in short, to follow him.

You know, in the gospel of Mark, the disciples are often portrayed as clueless – not understanding. But I give the disciples credit. When Jesus taught them to lose, deny, take up, and follow, I'm sure that they didn't understand what he meant. After all, we don't today! Indeed, one could easily spend all of the sermons during Lent on these verses and still not explore all the dimensions of them for practical Christian living!

What, for example, does Jesus mean by "our cross?" It doesn't mean being passive in the face of violence – to be in an abusive relationship is not our cross to bear! Nor is a chronic health condition a "cross," nor an unruly son or daughter. To take up our cross is certainly

²Pheme Perkins, *Mark, The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 625.

more than fingering the small pocket cross that we received on Ash Wednesday in our devotions, as positive as this can be, but it's not necessarily martyrdom either.

I think that Oscar Romero, the martyred archbishop of San Salvador gets at one meaning of the cross when he said: "The church must suffer for speaking the truth, for pointing out sin, for uprooting sin. No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sores twitches when someone has the courage to touch it and say: "You have to treat that..."³

I give the disciples credit, because even in their anxious confusion and their painful sores, they did take the first step – the last in Jesus' list: At the crossroads, they at least crossed the road to go with him. They followed him from north to south, from popularity to passion, from "Jesus" to "Christ" – to learn from him by going, doing, and following the Lenten road together.

³Oscar A. Romero, *The Violence of Love*.