

25 February 2018

Mark 8:31-38 (*The Message*)

Jesus:" then began explaining things to them: "It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tied and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive." He said this simply and clearly so they couldn't miss it."

But Peter grabbed him in protest. Turning and seeing his disciples wavering, wondering what to believe, Jesus confronted Peter. "Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works."

Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

"If any of you are embarrassed over me and the way I'm leading you when you get around your fickle and unfocused friends, know that you'll be an even greater embarrassment to the Son of Man when he arrives in all the splendor of God, his Father, with an army of the holy angels."

Standing in God's Way

I have always liked the Apostle Peter. Probably because I identify with him. He is bright, but not too bright, he is faithful, but he also glibly denies Jesus as well. Peter accepts Jesus as his Savior, but also grabs Him and protests. Peter is the rock upon which Jesus builds His church, but he also provokes Jesus into saying, "get out of my way." Jesus goes on to say "Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works."

One suspects that Peter did not appreciate being the Satan that was blocking God's work. This is where I really identify with Peter: There are many times when I am grabbing God and protesting one thing or another. My very protests are standing in God's way. Hey God, why did you allow that to happen? God, why do good people suffer? God, You need to get busy in the Middle East! God, why did You allow those school children to be killed? I find myself grabbing God and shaking Him in protest. I know that there are good theological explanations for all of my protests, but I don't want those clever answers, I want to FEEL the reason for God's actions. After much troublesome introspection, finally it dawns on even me: The universe isn't about ME. Darn! I was fully convinced that the sun orbited planet Munro. Finally, I am with Peter when Jesus turns to him and says, with sadness mixed with exasperation, Munro, "You have no idea how God works."

Suddenly I realize that it doesn't matter if I don't know how God works. I am standing in God's way by my LACK OF FAITH. It is not that I don't have faith, that is belief in things unseen, but rather that my faith is conditional. That condition is: I believe in God, so long as I am mostly in control. But, Jesus says "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat: I am. " We are powerfully reminded that faith cannot be conditional. We need to be able to give ourselves to God by acknowledging the reality that Jesus is, indeed, in the driver's seat.

Jesus even goes further by evoking very unTexan values by telling us that "Self-help is no help at all." Just wait a minute Jesus, we are very proud of our rugged individualism and the social command to be independent. If our John Wayne individualism, isn't going to get the job of living done, then what part of "self" is still valid? Are you ready? Jesus has the answer. "Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self." Trading in our rugged individualism for self-sacrifice is a difficult task and a life long work.

We already know that we are standing in God's way – now we learn that we are standing in our own way! Here is the text we all know by heart: "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Here is the

Peterson translation. “What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?”

We learn, then, that gaining everything is standing in our own way. What are these “things” that we carry while standing in our way? There must be many, but here are three that seem to be fundamental.

The first of these is *values*. Our guiding principles may be eternal, but often they are rooted in time and place. I grew up in a small midwestern town. In my grade school were children from wealthy and from poor families, from educated and from uneducated ones. We all learned together, played together and, in many cases, went to church and social functions together. The community was one (except for the Catholics who constituted a separate community of their own). We lived in town, but all of us had relatives who were farmers and we all knew and understood what life on the land was all about. We valued community and self-help and looked with disdain and suspicion on outsiders and outside institutions. Those values served our grandparents and parents well. But passing years met increased urbanization and social institutions that became more unlike one another. Communities of interest rooted in geography became electronic communities with great diversity of place and function. The values that served Boone, Iowa well, became dysfunctional in the information age. Basic ways of doing business, including ways of interacting with one another were changed profoundly. Those old values frequently become obstacles to being our authentic selves.

Also standing in the way of our real selves are *habits of mind* that block us from seeing new realities and incorporating those realities into our selves. When I was teaching I had an evaluator who noticed that I paid much more attention to one side of my classroom than I did to the other. The side I paid attention to was mostly men. I had the habit of speaking more frequently to the male side of the room. Did this mean that I valued male opinions more than I did female ones? Very probably. I changed that habit, but I wonder how many more little habits blind me to the full humanness of other people. As I have gotten older I have realized that elderly people are invisible to many folks. Just a habit, but a habit that keeps us from seeing new realities and from seeing old realities in new ways. One diocese of our church now encourages the use of gender neutral pronouns when talking about God. Dropping “him” from our religious vocabulary is really difficult! God is God – not male, not female. As we get in our own way, habits play a large role.

Finally, *behaviors* lead us to get in our own way from time to time. These are probably behaviors without any evil intent, but ones that act as indicators of prejudice and how we interact with our betters and inferiors! Do we call some people by their titles and others just by their first names? In Texas we take care of much of this problem by calling everyone “honey.” But you get the general idea: Race and class bring forth behaviors that separate or bring together people. We need to take a look at our behaviors to make sure that we are not unconsciously erecting barriers where no barrier needs to be.

Jesus said “if any of you are embarrassed over me and the way I’m leading you when you get around your fickle and unfocused friends, know that you’ll be an even greater embarrassment to the Son of Man when he arrives in all the splendor of God, his Father.” Let us hope that we do not get in God’s way or stand in our own way as we go about our spiritual-life journey. Let us not embarrass God!

Amen