

“Did He Say What I Think He Said?”

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
March 4, 2012

Lent II – Mark 8: 31-38

In her memorable book, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather tells of the Acoma Indians who, after too many encounters with danger, finally chose to leave the plains and move up to the high mesas. They believed that up on those rocks, they would at last find safety. These Indians, she wrote, “born in fear and dying by violence, had at last taken this leap away from the earth and had found the hope of all suffering and tormented creatures...safety.” But, she added, in their flight to safety, these Indians lost their vitality, their spark, their involvement in life, and eventually died out. Safe was not saved. Oh, but we so like to be safe.

“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.” What do such words say about our human desire for safety and security, about our preference for a sure thing? Losing life to save it? Taking up a cross? Not phrases one generally puts in a church brochure or newspaper ad. “Come, lose your life with us! Call us 823-2484.” Probably not going to happen.

As I was reflecting on these challenging, even troubling words of Jesus, I came across these words from Tom Robbins in his book, *Another Roadside Attraction*. Says Robbins, “You have risked your life, but what else have you ever risked? Have you ever risked disapproval? Have you ever risked economic security? Have you ever risked a belief? I see nothing particularly courageous in risking one’s life. So you lose it, you go to your hero’s heaven and everything is milk and honey ‘til the end of time, right? You get your reward and suffer no earthly consequences. That’s not courage. Real courage is risking something you have to keep on living with, real courage is risking something that might force you to rethink your thoughts and suffer change and stretch consciousness. Real courage is risking one’s clichés.” Could that be the challenge, even the threat we encounter in this text? Jesus certainly doesn’t seem interested in safety. Rather, he seems to want to know what are we willing to risk as we walk the Jerusalem road with him?

In today’s text, for the first time in the Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples and us where he is going. They are on the other side of the Jordan River, at Caesarea Philippi, far from home and familiar territory. So Jesus uses this time and place to quiz the disciples about his true identity. “Who do people say that I am?” They give fairly standard, safe answers. “Some say you are John the Baptist, or maybe Elijah or one of the other prophets.” Basically, they are saying that Jesus is an enlargement of something they already know.

But Peter, the lead disciple, dares to take things a bit further: “You are not just another prophet or preacher. You are the Christ, the Messiah, the long-awaited one who will free and redeem Israel.” Way to go Peter! Here we are, eight chapters into the Gospel, and finally someone, besides a demon, dares to speak the truth about Jesus...good, glad that’s cleared up once and for all...or is it?

Because it quickly and painfully becomes clear that Peter’s concept of Messiah and Jesus’ concept of Messiah are not even remotely close.

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things...be rejected, even be killed...” What? Did he say what I thought he said? Peter immediately takes out the messiah-disciple contract and begins reading the fine print. This isn’t right; this isn’t what Messiahs do. A proper Messiah brings God’s liberating power. A proper Messiah ends Roman oppression and returns Israel to its former glory. A proper Messiah sets the world right once and for all. He does not suffer and die. So Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him – strong word. This is not polite discussion among colleagues. I love the honesty of Mark.

For Jesus does not back down. He, in turn, rebukes Peter. Again, a strong word, a word generally reserved for what Jesus does with demons, he rebukes them. And for good measure, Jesus adds, “Get behind me, Satan!” Ouch! Here we are at the heart of Jesus’ mission; here we are at the heart of what it means to follow this particular Messiah. So Jesus uses harsh, strong language – he does not want there to be any doubt. And then, as if he hasn’t already said enough, he adds, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Is this the Jesus they signed on to follow? Is this the Jesus we signed on to follow? I don’t remember Gene mentioning this text in the new members’ class. There is such a radical discontinuity between God’s purposes and our purposes, between Jesus’ way and our way of safety and security.

A minister shares this story: “I was visiting in a store-front church in one of our major cities. For the Sunday service, fifteen and sixteen people, mostly homeless men and women, gathered to sing hymns,

pray and hear a sermon. After the service, as I talked with the pastor, I asked, 'Do you ever get discouraged that you don't have more people come to your church?'

"'Discouraged?'" he asked in surprise. 'Why should I be discouraged? Jesus only got out about twelve people. We always get more than that. When you consider the craziness of this city, the mad pursuit of stuff, the materialism, the lies, I always think it's rather amazing that Jesus is able to find around twenty people who are wild enough to follow him.'

Concludes this pastor, "When one considers the narrow way of the cross Jesus calls us to, it really is amazing that even a dozen show up to walk it with him."

But you have showed up, I have showed up, the choir showed up – what do we do with this text, with this messiah who contradicts everything a proper messiah should be? I believe that when Jesus begins to teach his disciples he wants to give them a new understanding of who he is. He is not simply more of the same old thing. He is something unexpected, something new. And I think he wants those who follow him to experience that unexpected newness in their own lives. You might say that what we have here is an invitation...an invitation to re-imagine our lives, to see ourselves living out a different story than the one we thought we were living, to see ourselves participating in a new reality, to see ourselves as created, not simply for success and wealth and happiness, but rather created for a relationship with and service to a living and surprising and unexpected God. Are we willing to take the risk of such a relationship, of re-imagining our lives, or are we going to play it safe?

A pastor writes: "A man came to me, saying how deeply concerned he had become about some of the practices at his workplace. He detected a clear pattern of how some people were promoted, and some were not promoted, solely because of the color of their skin. His boss repeatedly passed over workers who performed well and were a credit to the company, because of their race.

"As his pastor I urged him to be careful in how he broached this subject with his boss. He ought to find out if there were others in the company who shared his concern. He needed to be very careful in any discussion of possible racial discrimination. He ought not to come across as "holier than thou" or self-righteous.

He followed my advice and eventually confronted his boss. A month later, he was unceremoniously fired. It took him nearly a year to find another job, largely due to his boss' bad opinion of him. When he finally got a job, it was not as good a job as the one he lost.

I'm sorry, perhaps I should have found a story where the good and caring guy or gal wins in the end. And yet, in a way, perhaps this man did win. He chose the path of honesty and integrity, his soul was intact. He refused to be, much like that famous Man in a Gray Flannel Suit" someone who will say and do anything for pay. This is where I believe Jesus is taking us in this text, especially when he speaks of taking up our cross. He is pointing toward his life as a path for our journey. This is not a call to success or a promise that everyone will turn out right in the end. It is a call to discipleship, a call to forget playing it safe and instead be willing to confront whatever powers out there are standing in the way of the saving and liberating work of God.

Where is our focus going to be? Are we ready to share in Christ's story, to participate in the new reality of God's reign, even when it is anything but safe? Do we really want to reach out to others caringly and trustingly, if later on it will cost us tears? Do we really want to expose ourselves to the possibility of hurt or disappointment or rejection or failure? Do we really want to get close to this Jesus if later he is going to ask us to do something really heroic or worthwhile with our lives...even losing them to save them? Gosh, it's nice and safe in here. But the point of our faith is not simply to sit in safety and listen to Jesus' teaching, but to get out and take the risk of living that teaching.

A final story told by a colleague: "I was admiring the beautiful sanctuary. The church had just gone through an expensive renovation and had installed an impressive new pipe organ in the front of the sanctuary. I admired the beauty of the room, yet, something seemed to be missing.

"'You probably notice that we don't have a cross in the front,' said the host pastor."

"I had to confess that I had not noticed."

"'Frankly,' he said, 'once we got the new organ installed, dominating the front of the church like it does, there just wasn't room for the cross.'"

Concludes my colleague, "Take this as a sort of parable of many of our churches today. Amid all of our busyness and programs and service and beauty, just no room for the cross."