

The Unexpected Jesus: This is Good News?

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Mark 8:31-38

Back in the mid-20th century, the distinguished American literary critic, Elizabeth Hardwick, met poet, Robert Lowell, who was in the midst of a divorce. They eventually married, but during their honeymoon, Lowell had a manic-depressive, psychotic breakdown. It was a prelude to a long though tumultuous marriage, filled with Lowell's mental issues and infidelities.

The two founded the prestigious New York Review of Books, but their legendarily difficult marriage was known to many. When she was interviewed later in life, after the death of Lowell, Hardwick told the interviewer, "I didn't know what I was getting into but even if I had I would still have married him. He was not crazy all the time."

I don't officiate at as many weddings as I used to, but when talking with couples before their wedding, I try to get to know them, share some of my reflections on marriage and gently ask them if they have any idea what they are getting into. (perhaps that is why I don't do many wedding these days!) And yet, when I think about it, how can an engaged couple really answer that question? If we have been married five months, five years or fifty years, did any of us really know what we were getting into when we got married?

Pity the poor disciples. They have responded to Jesus' call to follow – have left everything to follow him – and things have been going pretty well: dynamic preaching and teaching, dramatic healings, big crowds. Things are going great! And then the mood dramatically changes. Jesus starts talking about betrayal, terrible suffering and death. And if that isn't enough bad news, he also suggests that those who follow him must follow his path, which is the path of the cross. Not hard to imagine the disciples saying, "Now wait just a minute. Back by the lake, you never said anything about a cross. We are beginning to think that we didn't know what we were getting into when we said we would follow you." Perhaps the people who joined the church today are thinking, "Wait a minute, Gene, you never said anything about a cross!"

I was recently in Phoenix visiting my father. There are a number of very large churches in that city. I passed by a large billboard paid for by a local mega-church. The billboard had a large image of a disgustedly young and good-looking preacher holding a Bible and smiling. Beneath his smiling face, there was a list of human maladies: Confused? Lonely? Depressed? We were urged to call the church's telephone number. This church wanted all of us who saw that billboard to know that it exists to fulfill our needs, pump us up, feel good about ourselves. If we have an itch, that church promises to scratch it.

Not a bad thing. We could all use a little spiritual TLC from time to time. And perhaps this is what Peter and the disciples thought they would receive from Jesus. This must be why Peter rebukes Jesus when, instead of getting a sermon on the five steps to a happy life, Jesus, speaks to them about suffering and death and carrying a cross. What kind of a Messiah is this? Well, certainly not one that anyone expected. Jesus is a game-changer; he is not simply more of the same old thing – which not only Peter but also a number of recent books about Jesus don't seem to understand. He's rewriting the Messiah script; he is something entirely new. Peter and much of Peter's world were looking for a leader, a Messiah, who would throw the Romans out and restore Israel to the glory days of King David. The oppression and suffering and pain would pass away and all would be well as God's kingdom on earth was established once and for all. But apparently Jesus did not get that memo. For he spoke of a kingdom that will come through self-giving, sacrifice, and selfless love; this is a king who will rule from a cross. Again, not exactly what Peter had in mind.

Some of you might recall the Russian comedian, Yakov Smirnoff. He liked to talk about the amazing discoveries he made when we first arrived in America. One of these was the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. In his words, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk – you just add water and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice – you just add water and you get orange juice. Then I saw baby powder and I thought to myself... What a country!" I wonder if this is somewhat how Peter and the disciples saw Jesus – instant Messiah – just add water, you're your fingers, and make everything all right.

But Jesus, it seems, has another vision, a vision that goes something like this: The story is told of two young brothers who were caught stealing sheep. The punishment in that part of the world was to brand the thief's forehead with the letters ST which stood for sheep thief. As a result of this, one brother left the village and spent his life wandering from place to place, never really recovering from this disgrace. But the other brother remained in the village, made restitution to the owner of the sheep and became a caring friend and neighbor. He lived out his life in his village, a man beloved by all.

One day a stranger came to town and inquired about the ST on the old man's forehead. "I'm not sure what it means," a village resident told him. "It happened long ago, but I think the letters must stand for saint." From thief to saint... a life, a village, transformed.

I believe this is the path we are called to follow by this particular messiah – the path, not of worldly glory and honor, not of wealth and recognition, but the path of transformation. It is the path of death to the old self and rising to a new self, of losing our lives to find true life. It is the perilous, narrow risky way that leads to a God we would not have met had we not been following Jesus. In the words of the late, and much missed, Marcus Borg, "The process of personal transformation is at the center of the Christian life. It means dying to an old way of being and being born to a new way of being, dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity – a way of being and an identity centered in the sacred, in Spirit, in Christ, in God..! Thus, for Mark, the 'way' of Jesus leads from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the destination of the journey, is the place of death and resurrection, of endings and beginnings, where, to use an old word-play, the tomb becomes the womb. For Mark, the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, is the path of personal transformation, the path of death and resurrection."

Jesus comes along and basically contradicts most everything we have come to believe about divinity. He teaches that God's mercy is given to sinners and is not reserved solely for the righteous; that God's strength is exposed in weakness, not displayed in power; that God's wisdom is veiled in parable and paradox, not set out in self-help maxims. God does not conform to human expectations or desires, for God is found in uncertainty, service, suffering and self-giving, often precisely where human wisdom perceives only God's absence. As G.K. Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

I will close with an observation shared by Philip Yancy. He noted that in his career as a writer and journalist he had interviewed a wide range of people whom he divided roughly into two types: the stars and the servants. For the stars – great athletes, famous authors, film and TV personalities – he said he had come to feel great sympathy. In his words, "These idols are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met. They appear to have more troubled marriages, tormented psyches and incurable self-doubts than most"

The servants, on the other hand – relief workers in Bangladesh, teachers in the jungles of South America, missionaries working in primitive conditions in out of the way villages – seemed to be, in his words, the favored ones. "I was prepared to honor and admire these servants, to uphold them as inspiring examples. I was not, however, prepared to envy them. But as I reflect on the two groups, stars and servants, the servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones. They work for low pay, long hours and no applause, sharing their talents with the poor and uneducated. But somehow, in the process of losing their lives, they have found them."

Clearly he is overstating his point. I'm quite sure there are stars who are quite happy and fulfilled and who do many kind and caring and self-giving things. And I know there are servants who are unhappy and miserable. But do you see where he is going here, indeed where Jesus is going? He refuses to make his way sound easier than it is. He wants us to know that his life is not as much about meeting people's needs as it is leading us to a whole new life, a life that may put us into conflict with the conventional wisdom of the old life.

But it is also the life of reconnection with God. It is the life of the returned prodigal, the life of the crippled woman standing up and being restored to health, the life of Lazarus raised from the dead. When we can finally accept Jesus for who he is, then we can begin to understand who we are to be, taking up our own crosses, embracing a new, transformed life, and walking with him in paths of self-giving love and service.