

SLD09.13.09 24th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Mark 8: 27-38
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“Nuts! (The Gospel in a Nutshell)

Jesus suffers and dies on the cross. Anyone wants to follow Jesus, they gotta do the same: deny themselves and take up their own cross. And, in the process, be willing to lose their life.

Nuts. I like the “God is love” approach better, don’t you? The “What a Friend I Have in Jesus,” Holy Spirit as Comforter, spin. “Come Down, O Love Divine” sounds a whole lot more inviting than “Go to Dark Gethsemane,” doesn’t it? The most important thing is to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” isn’t it?

To be good, kind, generous, fair? Or, as Garrison Keillor puts it, “Be well, do good work, and keep in touch.” Pretty well sums up the “great commandment,” doesn’t it? Love God, love neighbor, love self.....

So what’s up with all this suffering, rejection, dying and rising again Jesus keeps talking about? Maybe some folks aren’t clear about who Jesus is but Peter is, and that’s simply no way for a messiah to talk. “Not *my* messiah, anyway,” thinks Peter. “He needs to cut that out.” Not everybody understands who Jesus is as well as Peter does. A lot of people get him wrong. Even a lot of his *disciples* get him wrong. So when Jesus asks “Who do people say that I am? What’s the word on the street about me,” Peter knows best.

After all, Jesus has been around for a while now, wandering through Galilee, making people well, doing good work, keeping in touch with the crowd who follows him.

Already he's fed the five thousand, healed the little girl, stilled a storm, and walked on water – Peter know just who Jesus is, though he lets the other disciples give it a shot.

James and John shuffle their feet. “Well, you know, some people think you're John the Baptist. Which is really not a bad thing because the Baptist held a lot of sway around here. And even though everybody knows that Herod beheaded John for a little booty, but that doesn't mean God couldn't bring him back to life in you, Jesus. I mean, nothing's impossible with God, right?”

Silence.

Andrew and Levi look at each other. “Well,” says Levi, “we heard some folks the other day talking about how you might be Elijah. Which we thought was pretty cool because Elijah had a lot of power.”

“Yeah, Elijah rules, man.” says Mark. “Remember how he annihilated those prophets of Baal? Ha! And how he put Ahab in his place that time he pulled a fast one on Naboth (even though everybody knows it was really Jezebel's fault.) Plus, Elijah never died, right, but was taken up in a chariot of fire, and is coming back to set things straight? That sort of sounds like you, doesn't it, Jesus?”

Still no comment.

“Oh, brother,” says Matthew. “I've heard you called so many different prophets. The other day somebody even said you might be Jeremiah, but Jeremiah was so depressed all the time. I don't think they know what they're talking about, do you?”

“Okay,” says Jesus. So who do *you* say that I am?”

Oh. Well...you know...we all know you're....

“The Messiah!” blurts Peter. “We all know you’re the Messiah! Right, guys?”

“Yeah, sure. You’re the Messiah. We all know that.”

“Hmm. Yeah. Well, yes and no,” says Jesus. “How about y’all just keep that idea to yourselves for a while, hear?”

Because a messiah means different things to different people.

Historically, all it really meant was that you were anointed by God to do something. Anybody divinely appointed to a task could be called a messiah.¹ Former kings of Israel were called “messiahs;” so were priests. Shoot, the Babylonian Jews even called Cyrus of Persia a “messiah” for letting them go home, and Cyrus was Zoroastrian!

It’s a tricky word, “messiah,” its definition depending primarily on what people want to be saved from at the moment. What people around Jesus wanted to be saved from at the moment was the Roman occupation. Folks had been scanning for some time now for a specially anointed somebody to claim the crown and help the Jews do whatever was necessary to get shot of Romans domination. Many hoped this were Jesus’ divinely appointed task, though even the disciples wondered when the heck he was getting on with it. And now all this riff about suffering and dying at the hands of his own people.... Who wants to follow a Messiah who gets killed?

Peter takes Jesus aside. “Don’t be talking like that, man; it’s bad press. In fact, how about you stop talking altogether and just show us what you can do. Or tell us a story, say that one about the seeds that fall on different places. How about that one?”

But Jesus gets what Peter is driving at and rebukes him harshly. “Get behind me Satan! (Ouch.) You’re setting your mind on human not divine things!” If that weren’t

¹ Harper’s Bible Dictionary, ed. Paul Achtemeier, HarperSanFrancisco, 1985, p.630.

embarrassing enough, Jesus calls in the whole crowd standing around so *everybody* can hear the Cliffnotes version of his story. “Here’s the gospel in a nutshell,” says Jesus. “God sent me, people reject me, I suffer, people kill me, my own people, and then God raises me from the dead. Follow me and that’s pretty much how it’s going to go for you, too.”

“Nuts!” mumbles Peter. “Denying ourselves? Taking up our cross? Losing our lives? Why does he always make it sound like the *bad* news of the gospel? Would it kill the guy to accentuate the positive once in a while?”

And like Peter, who here today isn’t also hoping for a GOOD word from our GOOD shepherd? Something to fill our heart, not to deny it. Something to lighten our load, not add a cross to it. Something to strengthen our life, not teach us how to give it up.

Who doesn’t feel as disappointed as Peter to hear that those who want to save their life are going to lose it, but those who lose their life for sake will save it.

“For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” asks Jesus. Well, a secure retirement, for one thing.

“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....”

This adulterous and sinful generation.... In case you ever wondered why Jesus never pastored a church...well...here’s an example of his preaching.

Still, semitic hyperbole aside, what’s Jesus trying to get across to the ones he loves, the ones he’s called near, the ones he’s trying to reach? What is it that those

who love Jesus have such a hard time hearing, can't seem to get, can't seem to bear once they do understand?

“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” Peter cries out in Matthew's version of this story. And what is it that must never happen to Jesus, to Peter, to us, to anyone we love? Suffering? Rejection? Death?

“Get behind me, Satan. You're setting your mind not on divine but human things.”

For in the divine scheme of things, suffering and death are not all they seem. To be sure, they're unavoidable but they can also be redemptive. To be sure, they hurt, they disrupt, they diminish, they subtract, but through faith suffering and death can also be the route to change, growth and new life.

This is the radical and uncompromising nature of God's revelation in Jesus Christ: in the midst of pain and loss, suffering and death, God quietly knits together new life, whether we can see it in the moment or not. New life emerges out of suffering and death not because we will it, manage it, or demand it, not through our agency at all, but through the power and will of a God for whom suffering is compost, and death a bump in the road.

This is the gospel in a nutshell, the shock absorber beneath faith's rocky ride, the seat belt on the roller coaster ride of our inconstant lives. You could say it ain't much since it hardly smoothes out the ride – Jesus died at Golgotha; Peter ended up crucified upside down in Rome; we've all endured personal suffering and the loss of love ones. We'll all endure death. But because Jesus suffered and died the way Peter said should

never happen, he, and we, gain life back. Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

And not just save life *after* death – I mean, who cares about life after death? If we're confident God loves us in life, how great a stretch is it to trust that God'll love us in death just as much, maybe more, since we'll probably say and do fewer stupid things.

No, I think Jesus died on the cross so we could enjoy life *before* death. So we could live a life that's not scared of death. So we could live a life that's confident in its Source, in the knowledge that nothing in life or in death can separate it from its Source.

The great gift, and challenge, of the Christian faith is not just the commandment to love, but the gift of a God who dies when we fail, in order that we might live again.

Believe that, and you won't be afraid of the cross. Believe that, and you won't be afraid to die. Or, more to the point, believe that, and you won't be afraid to live.

And that, friends, is the gospel in a nutshell.

To the glory of God. Amen.