

October 18, 2009

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“Which Story Do You Live By?”

Mark 8.27-36

When you think of Jesus what’s the one word that comes to your mind? Jesus said, “Follow me.” As followers of Jesus, the image we hold of Jesus profoundly shapes the way in which we follow Jesus. What does it mean to follow One who loved so profoundly he was willing to lay down his very life for the sake of that love?

This season of Stewardship, ultimately, is about your heart. As followers of Jesus, there is a basic tension in our lives. We are caught between two powerful stories competing for our hearts. The story that becomes your heart story makes all the difference in the world to the quality and depth of your living.

One story is the culture/money story. The other story is the Gospel/Jesus story. One story has YOU as the central character. The other story is about giving your life over to something much greater than you. One story is a “Me, Me, Me” story. The other story is a “We” story. One story is about power and control and security. The other story is about giving your power away that you might find your true power and security in God’s love. One story is about getting. The other story is about giving. One story is grounded in consumerism. The other story is grounded in Christ.

Every day we make choices, consciously and unconsciously. Every day one of those two stories becomes your heart story and the story that is your heart story makes all the difference in the world...not just for you but for others as well.

Susan Andrews, when she was Moderator of the Presbyterian Church a few years ago, said that she was always struck in her visits to developing countries how much more joy there seems to be in Christian worship when those who are worshipping are poor

and impoverished. This puzzled her. She wondered whether it was because they possessed much less stuff to distance them from God...much less stuff to distract them from what is of ultimate importance...much less stuff to weigh them down with self-absorbed anxiety...much less stuff to live in fear of losing that stuff. She said, “When we own less and are attached to less, it seems that God can become the richness in our lives.

I remember in my travels encountering a man who lived in extreme poverty who gave me a gift of a flower necklace. This man’s face radiated joy. This was an overwhelming gesture of generosity for I found out later that one necklace was a week’s wages for him. I supposedly was the rich person but I prayed that I might have what was in that man’s heart that allowed him to be so generous, so free, and to give with such joy.

William Sloane Coffin described our faith journeys as the continual conversion from self-absorption to giving more and more and more of yourself away in love.

Jesus asked a question that speaks to this tension of the two stories competing for our hearts. “Who do you say that I am?” How we answer that question...how we see and understand Jesus and the Jesus story profoundly influences the way in which we follow Jesus.

Before I dive into today’s Bible reading, it’s important to look at what immediately precedes this question, “Who do you say that I am?”

It is preceded by a story of the healing of a blind man ... interestingly, the only healing story that happens in stages. When a blind man begs for healing Jesus touches the man’s eyes and asks, ‘Can you see anything?’ He replies, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”

Jesus then touches him again, “and his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly.” The fact that this is the only miracle of Jesus that occurs in stages makes you wonder if this story is told here because it is about more than one blind man being healed.

In the healing of this blind man, the man first has “fuzzy vision” and then ‘clear’. So, maybe, the disciples, and us as well, have a ‘fuzzy’ vision, a “fuzzy” understanding of who Jesus really is and what it means to follow him.

People then, as they do now certainly had their expectations of who Jesus should be. There were all kinds of speculations about who Jesus was and the true nature of his mission.

The disciples and many others were expecting him to be the Messiah which meant for them a political leader who would restore the Kingdom of Israel rising above the oppressive Roman occupation.

Instead, oddly, Jesus called himself in today’s Bible reading the “Son of Man”. Why does Jesus insist on calling himself “Son of Man” when Peter has called him “Messiah”? What is it about Jesus that Peter and the disciples don’t understand? How are they ‘fuzzy’ in their vision?

“Messiah” in Hebrew means the Anointed One. It was a term primarily reserved for the kings of Israel and Judah. Calling the Kings of Israel and Judah Messiah was very similar to Egyptians calling their kings “Pharaoh” or the Roman Emperors being called “Caesar”.

Jesus didn’t want to associate himself at all with that perspective. He spent his life and ministry proclaiming the exact opposite!

Jesus stood in solidarity with the outcast and poor, not with the powerful and wealthy.

Jesus, instead of Messiah, used the title “Son of Man” for himself. What does Jesus mean referring to himself as the “Son of Man”? One possibility is that there’s a book of Jewish literature called Enoch that didn’t make it into the Jewish Bible but Jesus would have been very familiar with it.

In Enoch, the title “Son of Man” refers to the Elect One whose concern will not be seeking security through the accumulation of power and wealth, but one whose concern will be the building of justice and the elimination of poverty and the building of a people whose stories are not centered in what they own but in their relationship with God. And this will include not just Jews, but Gentiles as well.

In chapter 62 of Enoch it says the ‘Son of Man’ will not be a conquering Messiah, but rather a suffering servant who will be killed by the systems but will rise again and “sit on the throne of his glory.”

The heart story to which Jesus understood himself to be called certainly seems to be Enoch’s model of the “Son of Man” rather than the image of the powerful and conquering “Messiah”.

Jesus called himself Son of Man whose heart story was the story of a suffering servant who gave his life away in love for others.

This image of Jesus as suffering servant...as one who doesn’t seek or wield power but willingly gives power away...didn’t sit well with the disciples. In fact, Peter took Jesus aside and tried to talk him out of it. And, Jesus, said, ‘Peter...you just don’t get it! Your vision is still “fuzzy”! And this image of Jesus...this Gospel/Jesus

story is still difficult for many of us today because it is so counter to the prevailing culture/money story. It is seen as foolishness.

Think about it for a minute...the image we hold of Jesus profoundly influences how we follow Jesus...if we follow the suffering servant we may find ourselves loving and nurturing and tutoring children who aren't our own, making strangers feel welcome, swinging a hammer and painting a house that's not ours, traveling to foreign countries...not as a tourist but as a servant, filling grocery bags for the poor, giving up our golf game to spend the afternoon with some one who is lonely, loving your neighbor even if you disagree with their politics or theology, washing the calloused infected feet of a homeless person, giving up being "right" and choosing to forgive, giving not what's comfortable and safe...not what's left over but giving of yourself and your resources what you feel God leads you to give so that you can walk away from that house of fear into the house of love.

Why on earth would any one want to choose this story as their heart story? Clearly, in our "look out for number one", "hang on to what you have", "cling to security," "more is always better" culture, this story is for losers.

I suspect if Jesus were standing right here in the middle of this room this morning he'd say - **YOU'RE EXACTLY RIGHT – IT IS FOR LOSERS** – and then he'd remind us of those very countercultural words he said, "Those seeking to save their life will lose it, those willing to lose their life for my sake, for my purposes, will find their lives, their true lives.

Henri Nouwen expressed it beautifully. He wrote, "Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes radically against my inclinations, goes radically against the advice of the world surrounding me, and against the culture of which I'm a part."

Yet, we are invited to follow Jesus into the depths of our hearts where the powers of the world don't hold any sway and where you can find your true power and security in God's love.

Let me finish with a beautiful story for you to ponder this morning. A stream was working its way across the country on its way to the open sea. The stream experienced little difficulty as it flowed around the rocks and through the mountains. But then it arrived at a desert.

The little stream tried to cross the desert, but it found that as soon as it met the sand, its waters dried and disappeared. After many attempts at success, the stream became discouraged. Then a voice came from the wind, "If you stay the way you are, you will never cross the desert. You cannot become more than a quagmire. To go further, you will have to lose yourself."

"But if I lose myself," the stream cried, "I will never know what I'm supposed to be." "Oh, on the contrary," said the voice. "If you lose yourself, you will become more than you ever dreamed you would be."

So the stream surrendered to the drying sun. And the clouds into which the stream was formed were carried by the raging winds for many miles.

Once the stream crossed the desert, it poured down from the skies, fresh and clean and full of the energy that comes from storms, whose waters flowed into the waiting arms of the wide, open sea.

Who do you say that I am? Which story do you live by? How you answer those questions makes all the difference in the world, to you and to the world!

(With thanks to Rev. Roula Alkhouri of First Presbyterian Church of Batavia and her sermon American Jesus on Sept. 13, 2009 for inspiration for this sermon and especially for the scholarship surrounding Jesus referring to himself as the Son of Man vs. Messiah and the story of the stream at the end.)