

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

February 25, 2018

Second Sunday in Lent

Mark 8:31-38

Words that Change Everything

Words that change everything. You've heard them. You've spoken them. You've craved them, and you've feared them.

Sometimes they bring joy and hope and promise: I love you! You got the job! It's a boy!
Sometimes they bring heartbreak: The cancer is malignant. Maybe we should get a divorce. You've been caught - you're busted. I'm sorry, but she's died.

You can almost feel or re-feel the heartbreak by imagining or reliving these words that change everything.

Jesus, too, speaks heartbreaking words that change everything. Imagine with me, the disappointment and pain and fear and heartbreak that Peter must have experienced... just after he'd showered Jesus with the high praise of knowing him to be the Messiah....

Jesus began to teach them that he "must undergo great suffering"...

"and be rejected by the elders"....

"the chief priests"....

"and the scribes"....

Until at last comes the final blow, "and be killed"...

And there it goes, Peter's heart fractured into a thousand shards of disappointment so loudly that it drowns out Jesus' final promise, "and be raised on the third day."

No wonder Peter refutes him. Jesus must be crazy! The savior of the world, suffer? God's anointed one, die?

Peter, you see, wants and needs a strong God. Like so many of his day, he's looking for a descendant of mighty king David to come and overthrow Roman rule and restore Israel to its rightful place among the nations. The idea that the Messiah must suffer and die was ludicrous. If anything, the Messiah was supposed to inflict suffering in his conquest. What good would a dead Messiah be anyway?

After all, Jesus has already brought about relief, comfort, healing, and life. Why on earth would he be talking about suffering and death?

No, Peter wants a strong God...and who can blame him, right? When the crushing weight of hardship bears down upon us, when the voices of despair drown out all others, when its one disappointment after another, we want a strong God, right?...To avenge our hurts, to right all wrongs, and to put us back on top of things.

By our human understanding and reckoning, strength is everything, evening the score is required, might makes right, having more and being more is the goal. But God employs a different calculus and measures strength not in terms of might but of love, not by victory but vulnerability, not in possessions but in sacrifice, not in glory but by the cross.

So what of our Messiah who must suffer and die? I wonder if the story isn't so familiar to us that we can't really grasp the power and impact of what Jesus says here. Until he says these words that change everything...for us:

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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

These are hard words. Accepting this as our calling and our path is probably one of the hardest things we'll do. Maybe this is why Jesus had to repeat these words so many times. In fact, they are spoken by him more times than anything else he said:

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.

These are words that change everything because they run counter to what WE want to believe.

Following Jesus asks for a life that in one way or another has the cross at the center of it...sacrifice is expected. We give up our lives to him. Playing it safe is no longer an option.

The Gospel of Mark is interesting.... This passage comes smack dab in the middle. And up until now, Jesus has been showing us how to live. But after this Jesus makes a shift and begins to show us how to die. Now that we've been given a life, he demonstrates how to give it away.

Which is what the Christian life is really all about. God doesn't care about our creature comforts. He cares about our hearts, that a holiness would reside there that brings joy and meaning that are far deeper than a comfortable living. If you want to have a worthwhile life, you're going to have to look for ways to give that life away. If you want to save your life, well you're going to have to hand over petty obsessions and mistaken priorities.

You're going to have to think more of loving others than of being loved, more of understanding than being understood, more of forgiving than of being forgiven.

We can try to make a safe-deposit-box of our lives, being very cautious about who we let in and what we give away.

But this is not Christian living. In fact, according to Jesus, it's downright dangerous living. We'll lose our soul if we're not careful. Living a life that really matters in the name of Jesus doesn't allow room for clutching or hoarding or playing it safe. Christians treat life more like an amazing gift to be shared than a commodity to be stored up.

And if we're not careful we can try to make a safe-deposit-box of our church too, caring more about ourselves than those who are not here yet, or valuing tangible things more than people, or keeping barriers in place - both physical and intangible - to full participation for all people here.

Or to say it in the positive, the church that follows Jesus, denies itself for Jesus' sake and the sake of others by including everyone, by valuing people over all things, by caring for others more than ourselves.

Jesus declares the path of suffering for himself, and then says, you too....you too...

And I wonder.... What if...What if these words that change everything are actually good news? What if by predicting his own suffering and death and resurrection, he is preparing us for the same.... and not just preparing us, but what if he's equipping us?

"Is there anything I can get for you?" the cardiologist asked Joyce, as she sat by the bedside of her husband at the Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem. A few minutes before he had told her that nothing more could be done for her husband. He was dependent upon the machine that was breathing for him. Those were her final moments with her husband of 23 years. She tells what happened:

We had been traveling with a group of church friends on a tour of Israel when my husband was hospitalized. By now the travel group had returned to the United States.

The tour had started in northern Israel. On our first full day we took a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. The group leader had asked me to lead our daily devotions while at sea. We spent some time reflecting on Luke's account of Jesus calming the storm (8:22-24). The day was quiet. The waters were still. But we knew the potential for a sudden storm blowing across the Sea of Galilee. We considered the unsuspected storms that can suddenly rise in our own lives. Did we really trust in God's presence to calm the troubled waters that could suddenly disrupt our days of calm?

As I sat in the family waiting room of the cardiac intensive care unit, I pondered the times I had sat in similar situations with others whose loved ones were in distress. I realized that there were no words of comfort in such times. I was unable to focus on words from the Psalms. I only knew that I had to trust God to carry me through this difficult time.

The cardiologist said, "I am so sorry. We did everything we could. Would you like to spend some time with him before we disconnect the machines?" He then served me a cup of tea as I waited for Jesus to still the storm. (Joyce Duerr, Christian Century, January 17, 2018)

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Words that change everything...Because the suffering will come - for individuals like Joyce, and for communities. And we respond - we follow - as individuals and as a church.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, Pastor Barbara Hunter, her husband and some parishioners sheltered in their church. They listened as the roof creaked, praying it would hold in the 130 mph winds. They watched huge trees topple over, crushing the roof next door. Flying debris hit the windows. Phone service stopped and the lights went out. Barbara's home disappeared sometime during that day, but they wouldn't know that until the roads were cleared. She says:

When I could think at all, the question came: Will anyone notice what happened here? Will anyone care? People are busy. But then church groups started coming by the hundreds, then by the thousands. They kept coming for years. They worked despite the heat, humidity, and gnats. They brought their tools, bottled water, handmade quilts, food, gifts, cards, and love.

They cried when they had to leave because they believed they had not done enough. I told them that even if only the yard was cleared of rubble and tree limbs, we could see hope. If only one room now had walls and a floor, we could believe we would be whole again. Together we sang in church on Sunday through our tears, fears, and sorrow. I never heard a church person or volunteer blame God for what happened or wonder where God was in our need. Jesus came to us through the volunteers and in our worship.

Twelve years later, we have new churches and homes with better construction. Friends and family mean much more. And we still thank God for the churches whose people answered the call to be of good help. (Christian Century, January 17, 2018)

Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, prepares and equips us for whatever is to come.

His words are the words that change everything - for us and for the world:
Follow me!

Amen.