

“Finding ourselves by losing ourselves”

March 8, 2009

Text: Romans 5:1-5, Mark 8:31-38

I.

This scripture reading from **Mark’s gospel** that I just shared with you is a common reading for Lent. A similar reading is found in both Matthew and Luke.

In Mark, the narrative of Jesus’ ministry is moving along. There have been all kinds of healings; there have been miracles. The truly remarkable character of Jesus’ person—of who he is as a man of deep compassion and love—is being unveiled. And everywhere, it seems, people are amazed.

People are simply not in his presence long without being changed in some way. There is something about him—his personality, his spiritual presence—that calls people to a higher purpose.

A calling to a higher purpose is precisely what happens in our reading from Mark 8. With no forewarning, Jesus starts talking to his disciples (and to the crowds, too) about his imminent suffering, death and resurrection.

In fact, this reading marks the first of three times in the gospel stories where Jesus tries to talk to his disciples about this darkness that awaits him.

However what Jesus really wants to talk about is how the meaning and purpose of our lives are more clear when we give ourselves to something larger than ourselves; in other words, to a larger purpose.

II.

If we give Lent a chance and pay attention along the way, our Lenten journey can be a deepening experience for us.

- It can absolutely take us to a better place, by sorting ourselves out—our values and commitments.
- It can tune us in to the profound communal nature of life; how we’re all in this life together and, therefore, how we—each of us—have to make sacrifices along the way—sacrifices for the larger picture ... our families, our community, our nation, and our planet.
- It can help us to **find ourselves by losing ourselves**.

Part of the power of Lent is that it moves, inexorably, towards the cross ... towards the undeniable, harsh reality of Jesus' suffering.

Jesus' suffering is not unrelated to us because it was the sin of the world that rose up in places of power to put him to death on the cross.

If we tell the truth about ourselves, this talk of suffering and death makes us all a little uneasy and nervous. However, this is a reminder, too, that Easter doesn't just happen in a vacuum of meaning or in a vacuum of history—history that really happened, that we can't afford to forget.

If Easter is about *resurrection* from the dead, if it is about *new life rising up* from the ashes of death, if it is about *hope in the midst of despair*, then we can't *not* talk about the darkness that gives way to the light ... to the new life ... to the hope.

III.

The point is that the darkness exists in the first place because of the sin of the world. Straight away, we mess up. It's not, of course, that we're inherently bad people because we're not. It's simply that as human beings, no matter how smart we think we are, no matter how enlightened, self-confident and self-assured, at the end of the day, we're NOT God. We have only a partial view of anything.

Part of the purpose of Lent is to unmistakably remind us of this once again. That's why the theme of *surrender* is such an important Lenten theme.

There comes a point in the lives of any of us—our most bright, our most evolved (whatever)—where we need to surrender; where we need to *slow ourselves down, breathe deeply, turn our lives over* to God and *seek*—as best we can—God's purposes for our lives.

There are times for any of us when we have to step back from all the craziness—the busyness, the confusion, the helter-skelter, the carelessness ... whatever it is—wrongs we can't fix, excesses we can't undo, and turmoil we can't calm.

For all of us, at some point along the way, there's a time for surrender ... a time for turning to God and letting go of the burdens that are weighing down our spirit.

In these stressful economic times, this is particularly the case.

1. The Dow is in the mid six thousands ...
2. for many, retirement accounts have lost thirty or forty percent, or more ...
3. And we can't help but be concerned about the rising unemployment.

In such circumstances, surrender is exactly what we need. Surrender of our *anxiety* and daily sense of *powerlessness* and our striking *inability to control* our futures.

IV.

The **Psalms** are helpful to us at this point—these very human reflections and soul-rending supplications about our *human situation*. Listen to how an impulse of surrender sounds out ...

1. From **Psalm 46** ... *Be still and know that I am God, exalted among the nations, exalted in the earth.*
2. And from **Psalm 37**, this same theme ... *Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him ... and do NOT fret over things ...*

This isn't always easy for us, is it? To be still before the Lord ... and to listen ... to pull ourselves away from all the clutter and noise of our busy lives ... all the anxiety and worry.

As a culture, we don't do well with silence. Too much silence makes us uneasy. It's like, *what do we do?* To just *be* before God without *doing* anything ... it's like the silence becomes deafening ...

Again, *Be still and know that I am God* ...

3. And from **Psalm 51**, the surrender that comes from a repentant heart ... *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.*

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ... Restore to me the joy of your salvation ...

4. And then the reminder where *surrender* takes us ... from **Psalm 33** ... *Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.*

Part of the challenge God has with us human beings is that we become so full of ourselves—our pride, our greed, our innate self-centeredness—that we can't get ourselves out of the way enough to listen.

- We don't surrender our ego and our pride easily, do we?
- We get so caught up in the clamor and the rumble of the world.
- And with the economy staring at us everyday, we caught up in the fear and anxiety as well.

V.

Again, we find this compellingly illustrated in our reading from **Mark's gospel**. Right away, this is a tough reading because Jesus is talking about his suffering and death. Understandably, Peter and the disciples are unprepared to hear this and don't want to have anything to do with it. They don't want to hear about suffering and sacrifice. Who does?

However, after some back and forth with Jesus and Peter, Jesus uses all of this for a teaching moment. Finally, he says to the disciples (to the crowds, too):

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 the sake of the gospel—will save it.*

This apparent contradiction of losing our life to find our life not only draws us closer to God, at the same time, it becomes for us a new way of living. Friends, we need such a way in these harsh times.

CHECK IT OUT! In losing our life to save our life, we end up finding ourselves. But we can't get there without the initial self-denial. The self-denial is critical because otherwise, the Spirit can't get through to us.

So much of our spiritual problem in life is that we can't get out of our own way. Our ego, pride, greed—looking at everything too much from our own point of view. We're like that.

But you see, Jesus knows. And thus, the challenge ...

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.

VI.

Over and again in our lives, friends, we find ourselves by losing ourselves. When we put our egos on the shelf and give ourselves to a higher purpose, invariably, good things happen in our lives.

It's sort of like *giving ourselves to the flow*. Whether it's in sports ... in relationships ... certainly in our most intimate family relationships, love comes to us more fully when we don't try to force it; when we just give it, freely, for the right reasons ... without trying to win or gain some advantage. We simply give love to lift up and exalt the other person; and in the process (in the flow) we find ourselves being lifted up as well.

In the BIG PICTURE of our lives, you see, it's not about us; it's about the relationship.

In sports, it's not about us, it's about the team. At home, it's not about us, it's about the family. At church, it's not about us, it's about the life of the congregation and God. Out there in the wider world, it's not about us, it's about our country or the planet.

1. I can't prove to you, that *if you lose yourself* to God's purposes that you'll find yourself, but you will.
2. I can't give you a fool proof argument that *if you give yourself to the flow* in life, that the life you desire will come to you more freely, but it will.

VII.

Hope builds up in us and in the world through a surrendering to God's larger purposes.

In closing, in **Romans 5**, Paul talks about the fruits of suffering, which are akin to surrendering in subtle ways ...

- suffering produces endurance
- and endurance produces character
- and character produces HOPE ...
- and HOPE does not disappoint because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

May it be so!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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