

It All Begins with Faith
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There are many passages in the Bible that I like. It's really unfair to try to pick a favorite. But Mark 8 would have to be one of my favorites. I still remember in Seminary a professor pointing out why it is so important – because it recognizes the first time Jesus is identified as the Christ. Peter, so often an overly impetuous follower who goes astray, has the wisdom to see clearly what others have yet to see – that Jesus is the One sent by God as Savior of the people. The verses become important for suggesting to us how we may be able to mark that point in our own lives when our eyes were likewise opened to the Christ. When Jesus is no longer a Biblical character, but our personal Savior! Our Christ!

Over the years, however, I have come to find even more meaning, in these verses and the ones that follow. Before we know it, Jesus begins to teach them about the Son of Man and what lies ahead for the Christ. It is clearly not what his followers had in mind! Otherwise, they would not have suggested he was like John the Baptist, Elijah or any of the other prophets. Such memories of these men tend to glorify the strong, invincible qualities of those who preached a fearless gospel. They assume that the Christ's word will supersede and fulfill the wisdom of those who went before him. For them, the long-awaited Christ is the ruler who will hold total power over earth. The Messiah, according to God's plan, will be received by one and all as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But Jesus sits these foolish men down and paints a different scenario. Peter is so upset by this that he takes Jesus aside and chides him for such nonsense. The Christ will not be rejected by the Elders of the faith. Nor will the Christ be killed for preaching the word of God. Peter is adamant that the Christ who comes will take charge and be in complete control.

I think it's really important that we understand what Jesus says next. "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (v.33) Jesus knows full well that the human mind always tends to view things according to who is in charge. And how that control comes about. Peter, as well as many others, assumed that Jesus would simply set everyone in their place, by divine force if necessary. No way would the word of God be rejected! He would never be killed! The word is omnipotent. The word is invincible.

For the first time, we learn the true nature of the gospel. Jesus, in saying that his followers will "take up the cross and follow" defines the faith as neither omnipotent nor invincible, but rather as love, sacrificial and unconditional. For in fact, love is what life is all about. "Indeed" Jesus declares, "what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" In other words, what good is the victory if it comes by any means other than love?

It does seem crazy, doesn't it? That God's love could be put to death by the ways of the world. We live in a wild and whacky war-torn world. Couldn't God, at the very least, assert control over things and once and for all rule as if He or She was really God? We become confused when things seem out-of-control. We, like Peter, cling to the hope that God will bring order to our chaos through control. Jesus, in this first of any number of passages where he reveals his mortality, claims that control (by God) is not in the cards. Jesus, himself, will one day wish it could be otherwise – that the cross might be denied him. Not to be! God's presence, strangely enough, will be more fully known through crucifixion and death...that the cross of humiliation and death will represent the nature of love.

Chandler Gilbert, a retired UCC pastor now living in the Jaffrey area, wrote a book of reflections a number of years ago entitled When I Open my Window. In the book, he very candidly reveals situations of loss, personal to him and his family. “Like countless others” Gilbert writes, “I have walked in the valley of the shadow. The darkest of these shadows was the death of our son, Mark, who, after twenty years, finally succumbed to cystic fibrosis...There were other shadows as well. At the age of twenty months, our first daughter was discovered to have a massive, malignant tumor. My wife, Bobbie, has had breast cancer and a mastectomy. Three years ago our second daughter gave birth to her first child who, brain damaged during birth, is seriously compromised with cerebral palsy.”(p. 63) His reflections spoke more about those times when he thought his life to be out-of-control. When he walked, for example, down a hospital corridor with his son; his son banging his fists on the walls because he knew he was destined to die early. Gilbert felt helpless knowing he couldn’t change the course of things. He and his wife retiring (“an attempt to get back control”) only to have his wife’s parents get seriously ill. Another crisis that went from bad to worse for her parents, followed soon after by the birth of their crippled grandson. At one point he writes, “To expect to control life is to live with an illusion.”

Gilbert describes the day when he verbally explodes at a caring and concerned neighbor, who came to him after news of his grandson spread. Taking both his hands, she said, “Why does God make bad things happen to such good people?” He answered her abruptly, in obvious and impatient anger. “You are assuming I am good or that God is responsible for all this.” Gilbert later apologized. Basically, he realized, he was angry at the thought of what people mean when they suggest that God is in that type of control where all things can be explained and given purpose. What kind of God would this be who inflicts children in hospital wards or creates holocausts with thousands of innocent victims? Such thinking is unacceptable, of course.

The dilemma is the same one that Jesus tries to distance himself from in Mark. “Don’t suppose that I have come to bring victory through power or mighty act; I have come to teach you about love.” “Ultimately “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.”(v. 35) Too often we tend to equate God with absolute control. We define in terms of power and ultimate authority or, at the very least, responsibility. Yet, Jesus makes it quite clear – from the very start – that this is a fallacy. God is not to be characterized by control, but rather by love. Love, of course, may well be powerful, but “it does not control.”(67) Love gives life; it heals; it strengthens and renews.

Gilbert writes, “I have been asked whether my son’s cystic fibrosis and my daughter’s cancer made me angry at God. I answer, ‘No, I am not angry at God for the simple reason that I have never for one moment believed that God had anything to do with making those bad things happen.’ Instead, in all these experiences God has been the source of whatever strength I found in the midst of it.” (68)

I bought the new Bob Dylan CD this week entitled Modern Times. The problem with Dylan is that you cannot understand half of what he sings. But in the song, “Beyond the Horizon,” as you listen carefully to the words they are fairly clear. A love song, I think. About whom, I am not certain, but maybe God. Describing in a personal fashion the point I have been trying to make:

It’s dark and it’s dreary, I’ve been pleading in vain;
I’m wounded, I’m weary, my repentance is plain.
Beyond the horizon o’r the treacherous sea,
I still can’t believe that you
have set aside your love for me.

The power of love is that it always waits for us. Through each and every circumstance. Love does not control life in a way that we might want as human beings. Yet, love supports us through our struggles; it carries us through the dark places - the valleys and the shadows. Love has the incredible power to strengthen us; to heal us from the carelessness of others and the illnesses of our personal worlds. That is the joy of faith that comes from knowing God, in Dylan's words, has "set aside love for me."

St. Augustine wrote, "My heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee, O God." What more can we ask than this! That in and through these confusing and often upsetting days, to be embraced (whether in struggle or crisis) by the love of God. Solutions may be elusive; darkness may extend itself. Yes, we may at times pound on walls in utter frustration...Still, the Christ declares that God has set aside love for you..."beyond the horizon o'r the treacherous sea."