

“For the Sake of the Gospel”

February 28, 2021

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

What is worth laying your life down for? For a lot of people, I suppose, defending family or country is worth that. As I think about it, heroics like that are mostly made to preserve something, to keep things as they are. But that seems very different from what Jesus is talking about here. He’s not talking about preserving something. In fact, everything about his life seems committed to changing everything. The gospel he talks about isn’t an affirmation of things as they are; it’s a complete rejection of it.

And that might be why we have trouble embracing it. It’s frightening to think that we’re called not just to change within ourselves, but to change everything around us. When Jesus begins his ministry in Mark he does it with the words, “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” That’s not meant poetically or theoretically; it’s an announcement of a new reality. He then goes on to show what that new reality looks like concretely. He casts out demons, he heals diseases, he feeds hungry masses. Life is changed for everyone who comes into contact with him. Oppression is replaced with justice, despair with hope, death with life.

What he’s offering them is a vision. That’s what the gospel is. The gospel is a vision of the world where the strong care for the weak and don’t exploit them; where justice is available to everyone regardless of means or condition; where access to work with dignity and nutrition and housing isn’t by chance but by design. That’s what the kingdom of God looks like. It’s not some fantasy or utopia; it’s meant to be real. And Jesus’ followers are meant to do whatever it takes to reveal it.

It’s not surprising that Peter found Jesus’ words uncomfortable. He was looking for someone who would force the world into compliance, who would coerce the kingdom. That was the vision he and others around Jesus carried. But a vision of justice can’t be realized through violence. Violence will never lead to God’s kingdom. As Martin Luther King said, “Darkness cannot overcome darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot overcome hate, only love can do that.” Being committed to the gospel, to a vision of a new world, means laying aside violence and coercion and embracing compassion and love.

And, as Jesus understood, that means walking the path of the cross. We have a tendency to romanticize that imagery. We think of crosses as something to wear, not something to bear. In Jesus’ day the cross would have been understood as the Roman occupiers’ harshest threat. There’s a reason we won’t find a description of a crucifixion in the New Testament: it was so common, everyone living at that time knew exactly what it meant. So, when Jesus tells the people around him they must carry their cross, a very clear image would have come to mind, and nothing romantic about it. He’s calling them to put their lives on the line for the sake of the gospel.

I read recently a new book by Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, titled *Begin Again*. It's an examination of the writing of James Baldwin and his impact on the Civil Rights movement. I don't know a lot about Baldwin, but in watching interviews and reading articles I know he had no illusions about the prospects for justice for Black people in America. In fact, he lived abroad for most of his professional career in Paris and Istanbul. He did go back and forth quite a bit in the 50's and 60's. He knew the leadership of the Movement, even if he didn't always see eye to eye with them, he respected them.

Looking back on that era in 1979 in a documentary called *I Heard It through the Grapevine*, Baldwin talked about the August, 1963, March on Washington where Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech. Baldwin says to the interviewer, "The bombing of the four little girls in the Birmingham Sunday school...that was the first answer that we received to our petition...." Baldwin didn't have any illusions of whether the Movement would be successful. Which makes you think he might have been inclined to give up on trying altogether. If the dream of equality can be met with that kind of violence, then why even bother? Who could blame him if, in looking back, he saw no point.

Yet, as Glaude points out, in spite of such bitter disappointments, Baldwin "worked tirelessly for what he called the New Jerusalem." The New Jerusalem was how Baldwin talked about the kingdom of God, it was his gospel. He was convinced it was struggling to be born. In 1972 Baldwin wrote in an essay titled "No Name in the Street," "An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key." Our responsibility is to the newborn, the New Jerusalem, the kingdom of God, the gospel. We must take up our cross, accept our responsibility, and help it be born.

In Mark's gospel we're told Jesus said this to his disciples quite openly. He was very clear where following him would lead. Yet somehow we manage to get that message scrambled. We imagine that following Jesus should put us on the road to prosperity, should bring us nothing but happiness and security, should make us victorious. He never says any of that. He's very clear that he will meet resistance, even death, for the sake of the gospel. And as Archbishop Oscar Romero once said, Jesus' followers should not expect to be treated any differently than he was.

So, the question we should ask is: is it worth it? Is the gospel worth laying down our lives? Is justice for others worth sacrificing our well-being? People like James Baldwin thought so. Even if, at times, he became discouraged and doubtful, he still held out for the vision. And even though we are imperfect disciples, even though the cross slips from us occasionally or we stumble beneath its weight, we can hang onto the gospel. This life we're called to, the emergence of God's kingdom among us, is worth our effort. And it's needed now more than ever.

The forces of darkness and resistance to justice in our world are more powerful now than they've ever been in my lifetime. People living in poverty, people left out or rejected by society because of skin color or gender identity or religious belief, are longing for a glimmer of hope. They're longing for a gospel that gives life and healing. They're longing for voices to speak alongside them and share their anguish. They're longing for us to risk taking up our cross and put our lives on the line for the sake of the gospel. Jesus is there right now and he's calling every one of us. Will you follow?

Amen