

Lent 2, Year B
St. Barnabas

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus has just elicited from Peter the first profession of faith in Him as the Messiah. And what happens next? Jesus predicts His coming Passion, whereupon Peter rebukes Him: I imagine Peter's saying, "What kind of leader are you? The Messiah is to be our ideal king. He will lead the people of Israel to power and rule them brilliantly. What kind of leader takes up a cross to lose his life?"

So once again Jesus explains what real leadership looks like; and we suspect He's getting a little impatient, for this time He ups the ante considerably: "Leadership," He says, "means setting your mind on divine things, not human things."

The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote, "Human things have only to be known to be felt. Divine things have only to be felt to be known." I suppose it was the mathematician in him that wrote: "Human things have only to be known to be felt." In other words, observable, concrete, even scientifically provable explanations once understood intellectually are emotionally satisfying. Once we can account for an event by cause and effect---whether in the realm of medicine, physics, or social analysis---we understand it and feel better.

But divine things, wrote the philosopher in him, "divine things have only to be felt to be known." In other words, the only way you CAN know them is to feel them. But how do you go about feeling good about something you can't understand? Where is divine peace in assuming a cross-like burden to save our lives?

Most of us regard a cross as anathema, like Peter did. Like Peter in this morning's Gospel, we think we would be more comfortable with human logic. But Pascal's suggestion is that divine understanding operates differently; that in order to know divine things, one begins by feeling them.

Lent is a season full of feeling. Throughout the season of Lent, we are called upon to follow in the footsteps of our Lord to Calvary, to take steps like Abraham's without understanding but with faith. Our focus throughout Lent is on the cross, a concentration that reaches its climax on Good Friday. On that day we fast. The liturgy is bare and solemn. The atmosphere is tense with sorrow and foreboding; and yet we are called upon to believe that the cross is the expression of God's love for the world, that in fact joy has come to the whole world through the cross. On Good Friday we sing, "We glory in your cross, O Lord,/ and praise and glorify your holy resurrection;/for by virtue of the cross/joy has come to the whole world." If contradictory feelings are centered on that cross, feelings of foreboding AND feelings of joy, how are we to understand?

Part of our confusion comes from feelings of praise for the cross of Christ and feelings of repugnance for our own cross. We are at war within ourselves over following our Lord and shouldering that cross. Our feelings are in conflict, conflict over the reality of the suffering the cross entails while yearning all the while for the divine understanding it brings. How can we appropriate and, thereby, understand the cross as joy for the world...in our institutions, in our leaders, in ourselves?

If we look up the sources of the celebration of the Holy Cross, we find it is based upon a story, some of it historical and some of it legendary. It is a story about a relic, a wonder-working relic; an actual cross on which Jesus is supposed to have died and which St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, is said to have discovered at Jerusalem. Constantine created a great shrine for it and put into his own crown one of the nails which was found with it. For centuries pilgrims made their laborious way toward Jerusalem and other places where fragments of the true cross were enshrined. They sought miracles: bodily healing, forgiveness of sin, worldly success, triumph over enemies, illustrious leadership.

But that kind of legend does little for us today. The cross as a relic is no longer seen as a source of blessing or a sign of glory; for we all know the Roman emperor Constantine was not turned into a Christian saint by putting a nail in his crown. He was a conqueror, a very human leader.

Our problem is, we cannot understand the cross intellectually. How can a cross bring feelings of release, we ask. No doctrine of the atonement, of release, has ever been achieved. As Ignatius of Antioch said, the death of the Lord remains a mystery---“hidden in the silence of God.”

We cannot say what a mystery is; but we can say what it is NOT. The cross is not a wonder-working relic, nor a ransom paid to someone. We can only speak of mystery in metaphor, saying what it is like...what in our experience points toward it. Perhaps our experience of leadership would offer us a clue.

I once knew a professor at Virginia Seminary who, when asked if he'd like to be a bishop, replied: “I'd love the honor, but I don't want the work.” A bishop? That's one of the models you and I think of when asked what leadership looks like. This week we learn the names of those candidates who want to be our new bishop. So we are asking ourselves, “What do I want in a leader?” Whether lay or ordained, we are here in part to equip ourselves to offer leadership in service to high goals. So why is it you and I have so much trouble understanding, in human terms or divine terms, what it takes to be a leader?

We are apt to describe a man or woman leader as assertive yet accessible, an advocate yet an equal, an example yet a friend. At many levels in the Church, we look for leaders who are humble, trustworthy, compassionate, and receptive. Above all we look for those who will share leadership. We want someone who is a helper, mentor, mediator, someone sensitive to the opinions and needs of others.

Those are admirable traits in many situations. But to listen and to ask is not to lead. One who listens and asks solely is “outer-directed, process-fixated, and vacillating.” And Jesus didn't call us to be admirable or vacillating. He called us to act. He called us to deny ourselves.

If our moral compass is adrift, perhaps it is because what we really valorize is choice, not cost. We want to leave open as options those high goals we will choose to serve. By force of will, by cleverness of mind by strength of purpose our ends will be served, our power will be solidified, our influence will prevail. Besides, voices tell us the time for heroes is past, and there are multitudes ready to put themselves forward for the honor without the price.

But the voice of Jesus tells us we must lose our lives for His sake to save them, to take up our cross for the sake of One other than oneself, the One for all. Jesus' voice says that to be His follower is to pay the highest price; to lose not just our choices, not just our lives, but our very souls; that if we can't afford to lose, we can't lead. Those who feel such divine things know we must be willing to lose in order to act.

Writing about Jacob's struggle to choose human understanding rather than divine feeling, Frederick Buechner muses:

“The darkness has faded just enough so that for the first time he can dimly see his opponent's face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death---the face of love. It is vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days until at last he cries out, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me?’ Not a blessing that he can have now by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing that he can have only as a gift.

Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy, are only from God. And God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and whom in one way or another we all of us fight---God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy

because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives---our selves, our wills, our treasure.

Will we give them, you and I? I do not know. Only remember the last glimpse that we have of Jacob, limping home against the great conflagration of the dawn. Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the Resurrection, bearing on his body the proud insignia of the defeat which is victory, the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God.”¹

Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus’ sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. If you can’t afford to lose, don’t lead.

(The Rev.) Judith M. McDaniel, PhD

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 18.