

Vision Series: Service. The Paradox of Service and Self.

August 9, 2009

Mark 8: 31-38

The Four Gospels are telling the story of who Jesus is and why he came, and how he died. The turning point in the story is when the Disciples, the rag tag group of men who were chosen by Jesus to carry on the mission finally begin to understand who he truly is. The reader of the Gospels know who Jesus is from the very beginning. We are privileged to hear the angel tell Mary that this child will be the Son of God and the savior of the world. We hear God speak from heaven when he is baptized, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!" But the disciples do not hear these things or know them. But they do see and hear Jesus himself. They hear him teach with authority that no person has ever exhibited. They see him exert power over nature in calming the storm and walking on water itself...a very neat trick if you can do it! they see him heal the sick, cast out demons and even raise the dead! Wow! He feeds thousands with practically nothing! But the disciples are notoriously slow of heart. I actually like this about them. If they can get it, there is hope for us all!

So a day comes when Jesus asks them point blank...who are people saying that I am...they respond...some people are saying you are Elijah of old come back, some say you're a prophet...some say John the Baptist come again (although John had just died, so this would be a neat trick). Then Jesus pulls the question back to them personally....who do you say that I am. It is not enough to know generally what everyone is saying...what the polling show everyone believes right now. You have an 80% approval rating right now Jesus after you raised Jarius' daughter from the dead! You're polling through the roof!

No! Who do YOU say that I am? What about you? What's in your heart? Tell me what you think?

Peter is the bold one, who often rushes in without taking time to think. He blurts out his answer...You are the Christ, the holy one of

God...the savior of the world! Yes, Peter, you got it right! Jesus says Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you but the Spirit of God. Right on, Peter...you got one right!

All the Gospels have this moment of proclamation and in all of them it is a turning point, when Jesus now turns his face to Jerusalem...toward the cross. From this moment he begins to tell his disciples how he must die and how it will occur. To say they don't understand is an understatement. Jesus is saying he will not be the conquering messiah they had been led to expect by the rabbis. Their hatred of Rome encouraged them to look for a messiah who would punish Rome and who would be a military leader who would defeat their earthly enemy. He will be the suffering servant, who comes and who dies for the sins of the whole world...

And what does that mean for us who believe and who follow him? To believe in Jesus is more than just to think with our minds that it is true that he is the messiah...the Son of God. It is more than just believing that there is a God. It is easy to say that you believe in God...it seems to be a required confession when you meet a minister...I rarely ask folks if they believe but when they find out I am a minister they almost always volunteer the information...I believe in God...but that does not mean that they live a life according to Christian Values, or go to Church, or do anything for their neighbor in need...it is simply that they believe God might exist somewhere out there...

Yet Jesus' call to us who believe is very different, isn't it. It is challenging. It is living out our faith in the real world... Know that we do not do it alone. Christ is with us..helping us. His presence, his love and power and his abiding spirit is with us always to empower us and strengthen us...and there is grace upon grace. It is not that we must earn his love...his love motivates us to live out his mercy in the world.

His call to discipleship...is personal and collective. It is part of our vision as a congregation.

1. If anyone would follow me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

There are separate but related elements in this call. First we are to deny ourselves. This is a key to real faith. We must live in dependence upon God. Surrendering ourselves to God and Jesus. We are not our own, but we are bought with a great price, bought in love and mercy. In essence we are making Jesus Lord of our life...and we are his disciples. He is the master, we are the follower. He is Lord...

This text occurs in all four of the Gospels. One of them says we must deny ourselves daily... I like that. It is a daily struggle to surrender control of ourselves to Christ. I am forever taking back control of my life...I need to surrender myself to Christ's lordship...to his being King of my life. I need to deny myself every day and ask him to be in charge. It is a process...

And I need to take up my cross. The cross is symbolic of self giving love and service. It is not that we must suffer, but we might be called upon to suffer at some point. We know that we are called to love one another...and love involves sacrifice and service. Sacrifice of our time, our talents, our desires and our will...out of love. Love involves sacrifice. Love gives, love serves. Love does for the other before being done for.

Jesus' words can be thought of as a demand for a total re-ordering of commitments in life. Jesus' followers must be willing to endure and embrace hardship, shame and even suffering for what is right in his eyes, not the world's eyes.

And We are to follow Jesus. We are HIS disciples. We are to follow him...actively. To live in close contact and relationship with him...and to follow him. That means to be in prayer, to study the word..and listen what it says to us. To be in worship and in contact with our sisters and brothers in Christ and listen to what advice and direction they might give us or we might glean from worship...where God is leading us. We follow Christ actively, not just from the Scripture, seeking to follow the teachings of Jesus...but following Jesus' will for our lives each day. Knowing that he loves us.

That leads us to the great paradox...of service and self. Jesus teaches us that anyone who would seek to save their life would lose it, and anyone who would lose their life for his sake will save. It. this is true of the individual and of the church. We at First Church have purposefully sought to be a church that lives out it's faith in service to others. To not focus on saving our lives, but on serving Christ and others. It is in doing so that we save our life as a congregation.

We come to know ourselves and know Christ when we lose ourselves in service to others. Where do you lose yourself in loving others? What so moves you that you lose yourself in it? that you lose track of time? That you find yourself thinking about it and planning for it and you can't wait to do it? Keep it clean now! Anyone who would save their life will lose it...if you focus on yourself all the time, you will lose your self. But if you focus on serving and loving others and Christ, you will find fulfillment. It comes as a by product...You lose yourself in acts of service, mercy and care and you find joy and wonder and fulfillment! You find friends and you find Christ in the midst of it...

What moves you? Where do you lose yourself? That's where you find yourself!

That is true for the church too...When churches begin to focus on themselves...on their survival they begin to die. But when they begin to serve those whom God has given them, they find new life. When their members joyfully begin to serve others...who and how is up to the members themselves and the circumstances of the time we are in...but we find meaning and purpose, we find each other and we find Christ in these acts of service...and others find us. Others want to be part of a church that is making a difference in the lives of people. A church who's faith is real and which is lived out in the real world in ways that make a difference in the lives of people.

So we work with the homeless, with the poor. We bought a housing project and worked to make it better, more affordable and profitable...sustainable.

Losing our lives for Christ sake...that we might find them, that we might find Him, and that we might find one another.

This is the paradox of Service and Self. What Good is it to gain the whole world and lose your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?

Good question! A very good question, one that only you can answer for yourself.

Blessings.