Nu'uanu Congregational Church

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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THE WAY OF THE CROSS Mark 8:27–38

Let us join our hears in prayer: O God, may the words of my lips in the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

May God grace and peace be with us this day.

Let’s review today’s story from the Gospel of Mark. As Jesus and his disciples were approaching the villages near Caesarea Philippi, “on the way,” Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

“They told him, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets.’”

“He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’”

“Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.”

Peter answered correctly. Jesus is the Christ. Now, “Christ” is a Greek word meaning “Messiah.” And when Peter answered, “the Christ,” he had in mind the popular Jewish conception of “Messiah.” “Messiah” for faithful Jews in 1st Century Palestine brought up images of a conquering hero who would defeat the power of Rome, a warrior who would overcome all evil and oppression, a savior who in a burst of glory would set all things right.

Now, we can perhaps understand why Peter refused to accept Jesus’ teaching that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Before there can be the Good News of Resurrection, there must be the Bad News of suffering and death. This did not fit in to Peter’s idea of Messiah. The consequences for Peter are harsh. One minute honored by Jesus for his correct response, Peter now finds himself in the next minute condemned by Jesus. Jesus goes so far as to call him “Satan.” “Get behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Today’s reading is a pivotal passage, a turning point, in Mark’s Gospel. From this point on, the Gospel story will take Jesus to Jerusalem and to the cross. The way of Jesus will not be the way of glory, but the way of the cross.

To this day, we don’t quite like it, this way of the cross. Many Christian communities have taken out the symbol of the cross from their places of worship, or if the cross is present, it is so pretty and beautiful that it covers up the stark reality of the suffering it really represents. In like manner, most sermons these days avoid the theme of human suffering. We preachers prefer a more positive approach to Christian faith. Speaking of the way of the cross sounds far too negative in a day when everyone wants his or her religion to be upbeat and happy.

But there it is. Jesus predicts that he must suffer and be rejected by those whom we might think would be the most receptive to his ministry and message- the chief priests and religious experts. And contemporary Christians, who like Peter, refuse to acknowledge the way of the cross Jesus must take, end up rejecting Jesus as much as did the chief priests and religious experts twenty centuries ago.

Today, let’s do our best to uncover some of the deeper dimensions of the way of the cross. To begin with let’s explore together the central tension underlying today’s Gospel reading, and that is the tension between the way of the cross on the one hand and the way of glory on the other.

Martin Luther, in the month of April in the year 1518, when he was called upon to give a defense of himself after he had posted the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, had this to say among other things:

A theology of glory [*theologia gloriae*] calls evil good and good evil.

A theology of the cross [*theologia cruces*] calls the thing what it actually is.

One way to understand what Luther meant by a theology of glory is to turn to the word “triumphalism.” A triumphal Christianity likens God’s power to the power of the conquering warrior. Every enemy is defeated once and for all. No more pain and suffering. No more injustice or oppression. No more evil. All these are conquered by God once and for all.

If this is the only song we sing, then the cross pales in importance. No wonder modern Christians avoid Good Friday services. After all, the reality of the cross is only temporary. The cross is of little importance in the long scheme of things. Ours is a glorious faith, we say, a faith that defeats and overcomes all the temporary suffering human beings must face, even the suffering of the innocent. Our faith is a faith that paves the way for us to enter heaven’s bliss. Suffering and hardship, as difficult as they may be, are not all that important considering the glory that awaits us. Suffering is not all that important or even real in the long run.

The theology of the cross, on the other hand, names suffering for the suffering it really is. It is real. It is not an illusion. In our world, the innocent do suffer. They really do. The poor in truth are poor. They really are. In Aurora, Colorado, Elijah McCain for no reason died at the hands of police and paramedics. He really did. This matters to God. It really does. A theology of glory would just as soon keep these injustices far from the heart of God. A theology of the cross refuses to do so. Human suffering is real and the theology of the cross dares to say so. It names a thing for what it is. It refuses to absorb injustice and human misery into the glory and bliss of heaven.

We sense this is true. Let’s be honest. We celebrate Christ’s resurrection on Easter Sunday, but deep within our hearts we know that human beings still suffer and that among those who suffer are the innocent. And we know that this suffering is real. We know that something very important is announced at Easter, but we also know that in many respects we still live in a Good Friday world.

Peter refuses to entertain the idea that Jesus must suffer and be rejected, and as for us, we would just as soon not have to come to grips with human suffering and especially the suffering of the innocent. Today, I am not even going to have us ask the lurking question: “Why does suffering exist in the first place? Does God permit it? And if so, why? Just for the record, I do not believe that God causes human suffering, but all these are questions for another day.

What I want to have us to remember from this sermon is something that has taken me years to explore, and I’m not finished exploring it yet. And that is what the way of the cross reveals about God’s power. When we human beings think about the power of God, we tend to do so in human terms. We think of power in terms of strength and might. Power is the power to defeat evil and establish the good. Power is the strength to conquer. Power is the might of the warrior. Power is the power to control the course of events.

The cross, however, reveals a different kind of power. The cross reveals a power that is made known in weakness. The cross reveals a power that is made known in love. In the cross, God in love comes to us in weakness and choses to be *with* us and *for* us, and because God is *with* us and *for* us, our despair can give way to hope and even in the midst of death we may receive the assurance of God’s eternal care. This is the power that is revealed in the cross. It is the power of love.

God does not use power to manipulate the things of the earth, to make things right once and for all. God does not use power to intervene and change the course of a tsunami wave. God is not a cosmic Santa Claus, changing the course of nature, rewarding those who are good and punishing those who are evil. (By the way, that’s a good thing, because the truth is that all of us are a mixture of good and evil.) No, God is a God of love, of a love that is ready to suffer, as we suffer, to suffer with us and for us. This is the power of God that is revealed in the way of the cross.

There is so much more to say, and we must see this as an ongoing conversation. I have sometimes wondered why I cannot remember the sermons I have preached. Recently, someone has helped me answer this question. I cannot remember what I have preached, because the conversation is on-going. There is yet more to say, and so why would anyone remember or give much finality to what has been said? There is yet more to say about the way of the cross, but for now, let us say that it lies at the heart of Christian faith and practice. Let us say that it reveals the love of God that this love has made known in weakness and in suffering, and that this has everything to do with the power of God in relationship to our lives and the life of the world. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “Only a suffering God can help.” That thought sustained him in his time of trial and suffering, and it can sustain us also. Thanks be to God for the way of the cross. Amen.