

***A sermon preached on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021 based upon Mark 9:27-38, entitled, "Growing in Faith and the Misunderstanding of What Makes for True Happiness."***

I mentioned last week that in the Gospel of Mark two stories about Jesus restoring sight to blind men serve as symbolic bookends from the start of Jesus journey to Jerusalem and his arrival there. Directly before this morning's reading we get the first of these two stories involving Jesus restoring the sight of a blind man. It's a peculiar story, because the healing takes place in two stages. When Jesus first lays hands on him, he can see people but they look like trees walking around. Jesus does it again, and this time the man can see clearly. Symbolically, Mark is making the point that the life of faith evolves in stages as our spiritual vision grows over time.

Mark follows the story of the progressive healing of the man's sight with this morning's story, one in which we see the disciples – and Peter in particular -- take a step forward in their faith journey, and yet immediately reveal they still have a long way to go.

**Mark 8:27-38**

**Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"**

**And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."**

So far the conversation is easy, surface level really. The disciples are quick to report that the people-- mostly poor peasants of Galilee – are pretty impressed with him – that clearly he is a prophet sent from God – maybe even the forerunner sent to prepare the way of the messiah.

Jesus listens, and doesn't comment. But then suddenly he moves the conversation to a place unmistakably more personal.

**He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?"**

I expect an uncomfortable silence suddenly descended – the disciples reluctant to speak, less what they say be judged wrong. Finally, Peter -- known as the most impulsive of the disciples -- takes a leap of faith.

**Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."**

The messiah is the anointed one of God, come to save God's people. It is the "correct" answer, a step forward in their faith journey. Peter recognizes that Jesus is the decisive revealer of the will of God. They need not look to anyone else to know God.

But the problem is, the nature of Jesus' mission as the "messiah" isn't what people assume, that is, the glorious liberator who will free the people from the Romans oppressors and the corrupt religious establishment. And so Mark tells us...

**And (Jesus) sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.**

That is, that he is in fact the messiah sent by God.

**Then (Jesus) began to teach them that the Son of Man**

The humble expression Jesus used for himself

**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.**

**He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.**

**But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."**

There is something that should be deeply and permanently humbling for those of us who make up the church. Peter represents the church – represents you and me. Roman Catholics see him as the first pope. And yet in all the gospels, Peter is the only person Jesus calls "Satan" -- the great tempter.

**(Jesus) called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For 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.**

**For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?**

Some translations use the word "soul" here in place of the word "life." The Greek word is "psyche" – a person's true center, their inmost self.

**Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?**

*Thus ends the reading. May God bless our hearing of the word.*

Faith is often envisioned as a stagnant thing: Believe the right things and you are set for life. Our story this morning suggests rather that the life of faith should be viewed rather as a journey, which is to say our understanding – our relationship to the great mystery we call God isn't static – inevitably changes – hopefully deepening over time.

In certain ways, we may have times when we feel the closest to God as a little child, even though we might not even possess any words to express the experiences. I'm talking about moments of awe and wonder that seem to come naturally to a child, taking them out of themselves in a rapture of wonder.

I can remember such an experience when I was about six, awaking one morning and lying in my bed, struck dumb by the simple fact that I was alive, and further, that someone had decided that I be given this great mystery. Perhaps you can remember similar God moments from early on in which you experienced awe and the sense of being deeply connected to all of creation.

If – like me – you were raised in church, and not one that preached an angry God of wrath, then you probably learned some helpful ideas about God: That God is powerful – indeed all-powerful – and that this God created everything, including you and me, out of love, and that God will love us always. We learned this as we learned about Jesus, how Jesus loves all the little children of the world, teaching us to pray to God for what we need, and the needs of others.

We also learned that this God of love expects certain things of us: that we be kind and honest and helpful.

We heard about the cross, but for understandable reasons that wasn't focused on. Who wants to terrorize a child with the gruesome story of Jesus getting nailed to a cross? Maybe we learned something about how Jesus died for us, and that somehow his death had something to do with God's willingness to forgive us when we did something wrong, but exactly how that worked was hard to understand. We probably didn't hear much about what Jesus said in this morning's lesson – that there is a cross for each of us to take up in following Jesus.

For the most part, what we learned was good and helpful – giving us a language with which to seek to connect more deeply with God.

But invariably, without it being spoken of directly, we probably picked up the idea that there was a contract of sorts between God and us – a contract that made life “fair.” If we lived good lives – if we were kind, and helpful and honest – then God would help us have a happy life.

*(In our Gospel story this morning, the disciples are operating out of the assumption of the contract that made life fair. As the messiah, Jesus would now fix the things that weren't fair. They freaked when he made it clear that wasn't what he was going to do at all.)*

As we became teenagers those mystery-of-God moments of awe became less common as a kind of paralyzing self-consciousness overtook us. The hormonal changes we went through

meant life became harder in certain respects. Our brains got bigger, and certain things we received unquestioningly in Sunday school began to no longer make sense.

We began to notice that in many ways life isn't fair at all. Truly good people get sick and die painful deaths, while seemingly rotten people seem to go on their merry way without a care in the world. Painful stuff happened to us personally and to our families, and we prayed to God to fix the painful stuff, and often times it seemed our prayers went unanswered.

We heard about children having their parents killed in senseless wars, and of children dying of starvation. We heard about people driven by hate crashing airplanes into buildings and thousands of innocent people dying and tens of thousands left grieving.

The contract we had taken for granted was revealed to be a fraud. Life isn't fair at all! And maybe, like you were like me, you stopped believing in God at all for a time.

Somehow, in spite of learning the stories of Jesus, we missed the story at the very center: that the kindest, most loving man who ever lived got nailed to a cross by powerful people wanting to shut him up as he spoke the truth about the way religious institutions were oppressing the people. If we had paid attention to that part of the story we would have realized that Christianity never said life is fair – quite the opposite – that this world is filled with horror and injustice.

Now along with what we learned in Sunday School, our world view was shaped by the fact that we grew up in America – or at least aspired to one day live in America with the ideals for which it stood.

In our founding document – the declaration of independence – these extraordinary affirmations assert that all “men” are created equal with certain inalienable rights *to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. These were noble sentiments, and yet something went awry as a culture evolved that focused so self-consciously on “the pursuit of happiness.”

We take it for granted that life is about pursuing happiness, but for most of human history the mass of people didn't give a lot of thought to the notion of happiness – they were mainly concerned with simply surviving and fulfilling as best they could the roles life had handed them.

The problem that arose over time was that the primary understanding we adopted of happiness has been a shallow one – a misguided one. In America we have our own distinctive name for happiness: It's called “the American dream.” Basically we are taught from an early age to believe that happiness is found in raising our standard of living beyond that which our parents attained, essentially to get more of the stuff the world peddles than our parents did: more money, comfort, and the material status symbols that declare to the

world that we are a success. We aspire to build a fortress around us that will keep our lives as free from suffering as possible.

I say this is all misguided, because even as we have set our hearts so determinably on the goal of achieving happiness, in recent decades when asked whether people actually *feel* happy, increasingly they report, *"No, actually, I don't."* Although the standard of living for most people has steadily and dramatically increased, with access now to technology that promised to make our lives easier and more enjoyable than people of past generations would ever have imagined possible, as time passes people increasingly describe living with more and more depression, anxiety and loneliness. Suicide is epidemic. Although these trends have been accelerated by the pandemic, they long preceded the pandemic.

Jesus was getting at this shallow, misguided notion of where happiness is found when he said in our passage this morning, *"what will it profit a person to gain the whole world (which is to say, achieve the American dream big time) and forfeit their life?"*

In some translations, instead of "life" the word "soul" is used. The Greek word is actually "psyche", which refers to the deepest essence of who we are. It's far more than our little egos.

We think of happiness as something that is attained when we get the things the world peddles, appealing to our little egos: money, big houses, comfort, safety, material status symbols that show the world we are a success.

And so from early age we unconsciously absorbed our cultures assumptions regarding where happiness is found, and took inside us the pressure this belief brings us.

When middle school students were asked, *"which do you think your parents care more about: that you be kind, or that you get good grades and be a success in school"*, the majority will answer, *"good grades."* Parents are alarmed when they discover their children's answers, but it was all absorbed by osmosis from the culture – this obligation to join the "rat race."

And you know what Lily Tomlin said about the rat race: *"The thing about the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat."* Rats don't have souls, nor freedom. They are driven by pure instinct.

Along with the shallow understanding we have of happiness in America, we also have a shallow understanding of that other "inalienable right" given to us by God of liberty, better known as "freedom."

We think of freedom primarily in terms of being free *from* outward constraints. We don't want told by either our government or our neighbors what we can and cannot do as we set our sights on attaining the things the world peddles as the keys to happiness.

Though freedom from outward oppression is crucial, notice this: the deepest freedom is that which arises not from the outside, but from the inside – from our souls. It is the freedom that Jesus had in spades. No one was as free as Jesus in the sense that he felt no compulsion to conform to the expectations that the world had for how he should live out his life. With his deep internal freedom he chose his life's path through the communion of his soul with God.

Freedom is meaningless unless it is used for its higher purpose, which always involves love. Jesus chose to freely lay down his life for all people out of love.

Freedom is important, but the ultimate significance of freedom is its relationship to our capacity to love. To live lovingly is a choice we make from a place of freedom. Jesus said that if you want to be great, be the servant of all. He said there is a cross for each of us to bear – the suffering that comes from opening our hearts to the pain of others in love.

I read a Christian psychotherapist put forth the idea that more often than not the object of therapy is not to solve our problems. Some problems simply come to us by virtue of our sharing in the human condition. The purpose of therapy is rather to enter into a larger life, by virtue of tapping into the depths of our souls which are so easily neglected in our rat-like pursuit of happiness. What is needed is a larger life than the one dominated by our little ego's anxieties and preoccupations -- a life connected to that mystery that Jesus called the "Kingdom of God."

A famous psychotherapist was once called to the house of a deeply depressed woman. There were many challenges to her life: she lived alone and dealt with ongoing health challenges. The psychotherapist spent a half hour with her and took note of evidence of two passions that arose from the woman's soul: her home was filled with purple violets, and she loved her church which she attended regularly, though her connection to the people of her rather large church was somewhat remote. The psychotherapist gave the woman an assignment. Grow even more purple violets – the most radiant and beautiful of purple violets. And then, whenever there is any kind of major event in the lives of the people of the parish: a birth, a baptism, a wedding, or a death, take one of your purple violets as a gift of love and beauty to the people experiencing the inevitable passage of life.

Six months later there was an article in the local newspaper about the "purple violet" lady. Her problems remained, but her life, having embraced her calling to follow Jesus, had gotten much bigger. The debilitating depression subsided.

