

Cross Walk: Losing is Winning

Mark 8:27-38

March 12, 2006

This season of the Christian year called Lent is a somewhat sobering time, for we know that before we can experience the joy of Easter and resurrection, we need to go through the horror and grief of Good Friday. Lent is a time for deep reflection upon our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus for us? When he asks us to follow, how do we respond – hesitantly, grudgingly, halfheartedly, reluctantly, willingly, obediently? Do we set limits on our following – only as long as it's fun or exciting or not demanding or not boring; only if there is something in it for me? Or have we given our lives without abandon - as far as you need me to go, Jesus; wherever you call me to go?

Jesus' disciples are moving into a deeper layer of following at this point in his ministry. They have been awestruck by his miracles and healing power. They have been challenged by his teachings. Soon they will witness Jesus' trial before the authorities and his subsequent death on a cross as a criminal. Today Jesus tries to prepare them for what is to come.

In asking what others think of him, Jesus is asking a typical question for the Mediterranean culture of his time. People depend on others to provide them with a sense of who they are. The perception that Jesus is John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets is an indication that he is held in high esteem by the people. Peter goes on to lift Jesus to the status of "Messiah," "the anointed one" of God expected to liberate the Hebrew people from Roman oppression. Jesus demands silence regarding his identity. He was born to the low social status of a village artisan. The public perception has raised his social status significantly. In a context of limited goods, it was believed that any increase in wealth, position, honor, or social status came at the expense of someone else. Jesus shows himself to be an honorable person by trying to keep such talk out of the public.¹

In spite of his exalted social status, Jesus goes on to tell them that his popularity will soon turn sour and he will be rejected. This is difficult for them to understand, yet alone believe. Bold Peter scolds Jesus for such a ridiculous idea. Jesus in turn tells Peter that he is not on God's side in this one. Jesus goes on to make things worse. Not only does Jesus expect to suffer himself, but anyone who is with him will do the same. Instead of promising that things will only get better for followers of Jesus, it will bring all kinds of trouble. He talks of self-denial, taking up the cross, and losing one's life to save it.

This is so confusing because Jesus has been setting himself up for success. He's gained the popularity of the common folk. He's rallied the forces so that he could just say the word and they would start an uprising against the oppressive powers. Finally the Jews have a leader who could break the bonds of oppression. All he has to do is exert the power and authority he has earned. But instead Jesus speaks of a different strategy. He is going to submit to his enemies and allow them to do him in. He won't seize his power to trample them. He is going to deny himself so that others can live.

Jesus' words seem so contrary to our lottery-fevered and pain-killer culture. We don't want to deny ourselves anything; we deserve it all and we'll do anything we can to claim our share and more of the prize. Nor do we want to suffer, nor should we have to; we just "pop a pill" or take a drink to hide the pain. We aren't into self-denial and suffering, but talk about self-absorption, self-actualization, self-advancement, self-improvement, self-interest, self-fulfillment, and we'll sign right up.

In Henrik Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People*, the protagonist is a health inspector named Stockmann. He lives in a town dependent on the tourist trade at its renowned spas. When Stockmann discovers the town's water supply is contaminated and dangerous, he notifies the town leaders in order to avert a possible catastrophe. To his surprise, the mayor rebukes him and tries to silence him. The citizens are outraged that Stockmann wants to warn visitors, for that could ruin the economy. By the end of the play Stockmann is reviled, outcast, and unemployed—but he hasn't compromised. Finding refuge in what he knows to be true, his final line is, "The strongest (person) in the world is the one who stands alone."

He lost nearly everything most people cherish: a well-paying job, a good name, a comfortable lifestyle, an untroubled family life, social standing in the community, a secure future. He "denied himself." He let them go for the sake of something greater, something he knew was ultimately more important. Until we embrace "something greater," until we discover something worth dying for, we're not really living.²

Erin Grimes was beginning her senior year at Dillard University, one of our historically black, United Methodist related colleges, last fall when the levees broke in New Orleans, seriously damaging the Dillard campus. She enrolled at Spelman College in Atlanta for the fall semester. On Nov. 11 she and her mother visited New Orleans so she could decide whether to return to Dillard in January. She writes, "The eastern park of the city was like a ghost town, or a war zone. Everything had been flooded, and there was debris everywhere....The university's administration had decided that

even though the campus suffered a great deal of damage, it would reopen at a different site in New Orleans. That was one of the best decisions they made.” Erin chose to go back to Dillard to finish her senior year.

Holding classes and residing at the New Orleans Hilton may sound glamorous, but it is challenging to transplant a university setting into a hotel. Erin writes of the emotional toll taken on students and others. “Students affected by Katrina, especially seniors, are indecisive about what to do after graduation, or do not know what they want to do with their lives. Before Katrina many of us were heading to graduate, medical, or law schools. Now, fewer than 30 have applied. I am among those who have not applied for graduate school. At this point, I do not know where to go, or what I want to do. It is not that easy to pick up the pieces. Many of the students at Dillard have not dealt with what has happened to us. Yet, here we are, survivors of the storm.”

Many have asked this 22 year old student why she would return to a school holding classes in a hotel, in a city barely back on its feet. She replies, “One of my good friends here said: ‘I owe it to God, I owe it to myself, and I owe it to Dillard to help rebuild the city.’ I agree that it is my duty as a student of Dillard and a member of the United Methodist Church to dedicate myself to the rebuilding of my campus and my adopted city. There is still so much work to be done to rebuild New Orleans. Everyone's support is needed to sustain the rich history I love at Dillard University and in New Orleans.”³

Erin Grimes is following the cross walk of Jesus. Students who have returned to Dillard have temporarily lost much in the form of college life, such as private rooms, technologically equipped classrooms, typical college events, and more. And yet, Erin has determined that this is a sacrifice worthy of a greater good. She values more than her self-interest; she values making her contribution to rebuilding a university and a community because she is a follower of Jesus Christ. She realizes that while some things are lost, there is far much more in terms of value to be gained through service. What a witness from a 22 year old!

Henri Nouwen writes, “The great paradox of life is that those who lose their lives will gain them. This paradox becomes visible in very ordinary situations. If we cling to our friends, we may lose them, but if we are non-possessive in our relationships, we will make many friends. If fame is what we seek and desire, it often vanishes as soon as we acquire it, but if we have no need to be known, we might be remembered long after our deaths. When we want to be in the center, we easily end up on the margins, but when we are free enough to be wherever we must be, we often find

ourselves in the center. Giving away our lives for others is the greatest of all human acts. This will gain us our lives.”

What does it mean for me to take up a cross? What does it mean for me to lose my life in order to save my life, to lose it in order to gain something far better? For me taking up a cross means thinking about our church in terms of mission not maintenance. It means doing the right thing rather than the thing that will bolster my popularity. It means caring as much about feeding hungry people as about meeting our church budget. It means loving the people who need the church as well as the people who attend the church. Taking up a cross means helping my family to care not just for one another, but for those who have no family. It means doing some hard things like giving money away that I would rather keep, talking about what faith means when I would rather be silent, and doing good for people who will not do good to me in return. I have to think more of loving than of being loved, more of understanding than of being understood, more of forgiving than of being forgiven.

What does it mean for you to take up a cross? Carrying a cross can take a variety of forms: worshipping in a world that waits to be entertained, turning the other cheek, spending time with people who seem to have nothing to offer us, standing with the people who are losing, caring for those who’ve made terrible mistakes, doing good that will receive no applause, sharing food with the hungry, becoming a better friend to someone with AIDS, delivering Meals on Wheels, emptying bedpans, holding hands stiffened by arthritis, sitting in a home where someone has died, taking other people’s children to the park, listening to a lonely person, treating discarded people as children of God, living with the freedom to be vulnerable, praying not for an easier life but for strength to follow Christ.⁴

Losing our life means moving out of our comfort zone, as did a group of monks in southwest Kosovo a few years ago. At a time when Serb forces were pillaging their village, the abbot of the Serbian Orthodox monastery took in scores of the predominantly Muslim ethnic Albanian villagers and sheltered them within the walls of the monastery. Serb forces came looking for the townspeople, but the monks told them there were none there. Now these acts could have cost the monks their monastery, or perhaps even their lives, because they were not being loyal to their own ethnic group and the expected political strategy. But they were willing to lose their lives for Christ’s sake, and for the sake of the gospel. The abbot said later that this act was simply the Christian thing to do. It was the human thing to do.⁵

I hope that if I were in a situation like that of those monks, that I would respond as they did. For I trust and I have experienced that “those

who lose their life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel will save it.” The only promise that Jesus gives us is that in the long run we gain more than we lose. Prestige, success, and even happiness as the world knows them, belong to those who take them for themselves. But peace, love, joy, and life are gifts from God given to those who give themselves.

May we take up the ministry to which God calls us, even if it entails suffering, for in losing our lives for the sake of Jesus Christ, we win what matters most. Amen.

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 230-231, 204.

² Rev. Brett Younger, "The Way of the Cross," *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. 11, No. 4, March 19, 2000, p. 22.

³ Erin A. Grimes, "Commentary: Life at Dillard University a daily struggle after Katrina," United Methodist News Service, February 27, 2006, www.umns.umc.org.

⁴ Younger, *ibid*.

⁵ "Creative Insecurity," *Homiletics*, Vol. 15, No. 2, March 16, 2003.

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