**In the Shadow of the Cross**

**Text: Mark 8:31-33**

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Being something of an optimist by nature – or, to put that in more biblical language – being a person who lives in hope, I’m drawn to expressions like, “When one door closes, another one opens.” So I was quite amused while reading the comics last Wednesday to see Frank and Ernest’s Proverb’s for Real Life: “When one door closes…it’s probably locked and your key is on the other side.”

However true it may be that by the grace of Providence doors open *eventually*, the fact of the matter is that in the short term doors do get slammed in our faces, and sometimes they *are* locked. In other words: bad things really do happen; sometimes they happen to very good people; sometimes they happen to very faithful people; sometimes good folks endure great suffering. The journey of faith is not a straight-line success story. It’s not always goodness and light. On the contrary, we journey in faith…through the shadow of the Cross.

Jesus makes this quite clear to his disciples in today’s text: “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering…and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). The Son of Man, of course, is Jesus; that’s his preferred way to speak of himself, and in so doing he’s already pointing toward the hope beyond the Cross. “Son of man,” you see, is an Old Testament image of the one who brings God’s victory over evil at the end of time (see Daniel 7:13-14). But long before that hoped for victory, there’s a Cross standing in his way; and standing in our way as well.

Peter is not at all happy about this twist in the story. Scripture says, “Peter took him aside,” and we can imagine the big fisherman putting his arm around Jesus’ and saying, “Listen Rabbi, you’ve got the plot all wrong. I really like the part where you ride down victorious from the clouds, but this Cross stuff doesn’t work well; we’ve checked it out in some focus groups and people aren’t buying it.”

There aren’t too many places in the gospels where Jesus gets angry, but this is one of them. “Get behind me, Satan!” he says. “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Jesus’ rebuke is trigged not just by the fact that Peter denies the inevitability of suffering, but also because Peter presumes to know more than Jesus himself! It’s at least as much Peter’s arrogance as Peter’s naivety that is being rebuked here. And this becomes clear when we consider what “Get behind me” really means: in Greek it’s the same phrase that Mark has Jesus use just one verse later when he says, “Follow me.” It’s as if Jesus is saying, “Listen, you arrogant bum: I am the teacher, you are the student. Now you line-up with your fellow students behind me and follow *me*; listen to *me*; learn from *me*.”

The world, like Peter, clings to the illusion that *success* is the name of the game. Jesus corrects him, reminding his disciples that those who stay the course with Jesus will *suffer*. Yet, those who *surrender* to the way of the Cross, those who follow Jesus through the *shadow* of the Cross, live in a powerful hope.

Success, suffering and surrender; that’s what this text is about. Let’s consider each of these in turn.

Success is the gospel of conventional wisdom. It’s the human thing upon which Peter is focusing. We all love success stories. In the Olympics, the focus is always on the gold medal. It’s been said that if you win the silver – if you come in second – that just means that you’re first among losers. No one wants to be a loser. As football coach Vince Lombardi famously said, “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.”

We are always looking for success stories; especially as success is conventionally measured: in numbers, in profits, in growth, in power. We think a church is successful only if it’s attracting new members and growing. Never mind if it’s being faithful to the Gospel; never mind if folks are being nurtured in discipleship and becoming faithful followers of Jesus Christ; all we want to know is, “Are they packing folks into the pews?”

Now, don’t get me wrong. Numbers are important. You have to have *some* folks in the pews. You have to have *some* folks falling in line behind Jesus and following him. And you have to have the financial resources to do ministry. And you all are to be commended for the generosity with which are pledges have been increasing over the last two years, and for the way in which we are now rebuilding our endowment. We need financial resources with which to do ministry. But even in business: if you’re focused *only* on the numbers, if you’re focused *only* on the profits, if you’re focused *only* on growth – especially in the *short* term – you’re going to be in trouble. Some of those profits have to be invested in workforce, and equipment, and new product development. And that’s going to affect the bottom line in the short term; even as it contributes to your *ultimate* success. As the saying goes, “No pain, no gain.”

But it’s so easy to fall into the trap of wanting *only* to be successful, without experiencing the pain that is part of the process. Following this line of thinking, if you’re not being successful, there must be something wrong with you. If things are going badly, it must be somehow all your fault. Sin is defined as failure and virtue is defined as success. And while this line of thinking might work for some people, and it might even get you elected President, it runs up smack against the Cross.

The Cross, in and of itself, is not a success story. It’s hard for us to see that because we know how the story ends. And Mark’s gospel is written from the perspective of how the story will end. Mark can put in Jesus’ mouth the words, “and after three days rise again,” but I don’t think for one minute that the historical Jesus said that; and neither do a lot of biblical scholars. The fact of the matter is that Jesus was killed. The fact of the matter is that he was executed as a common criminal, and in his despair he felt utterly abandoned by God. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” he cried (Mark 15:34). No one, looking up at Jesus on that Friday that seemed anything but good; no one at that point thought of his ministry as anything other than a total failure. And that was through no fault of Jesus. I mean, we’re talking about a man who was the embodiment of *virtue*. We’re talking about someone who was like us in every way *except that he did not sin*. “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering…and be killed,” Jesus said.

Which tells us that success is hardly the only thing that matters. And failure is hardly the fault of the victim. The road of faithfulness is paved with *suffering*. If you want to follow Jesus, then be prepared for a lot of failure and pain along the way.

And Jesus says this quite openly. When Mark’s Jesus does something that looks like a success story, like casting out a demon, for example, he orders his disciples to tell no one. But there’s no such gag rule on the suffering stuff. That’s because Jesus doesn’t want folks to get the impression that it’s all about how great and successful and powerful he might be, or anyone might be. No, it’s all about how great and powerful God is; it’s all about God’s peculiar way of advancing the Kingdom through failure and reversal and loss.

Of course, we all know something about this. Little kids have to experience some failures in order to learn and grow and ultimately succeed. When the parent rescues his or her kid all the time, the kid doesn’t learn how to persevere in the face of adversity. And in this sinful world there will always be adversity.

I remember writing my first research paper in 6th grade. I wanted it to be perfect, the first time. I was so frustrated when I had to cross stuff out, and try again, and make a clean copy before I could turn it in. Another parent might’ve offered to write it for me. But my dad let me suffer. He *encouraged* me, but I still had to suffer through the process of learning how to write. Out of suffering comes success.

And don’t get me started about my battleax of a 9th grade English teacher. Talk about putting students through pain and agony! But Mrs. Hunter, as you rest in peace, I really have to thank you for teaching me how to write.

More profoundly, there is the story of Andrew Carnegie. The founder of U.S. Steel, Carnegie was an immensely successful industrialist and businessman. He was also a great philanthropist. Beginning in 1890, he started to give away his vast wealth, and he encouraged his fellow rich industrialists to do likewise. Looking at things from the Gospel’s point of view, Carnegie’s greatest success was his generosity. And what triggered his generosity was his greatest failure. It was, specifically, a *moral* failure, and it must’ve caused him great pain. The year before Carnegie began to give away his money, he shared in the responsibility for the Johnstown Flood. 2,000 people died in Johnstown, Pennsylvania on May 31, 1889. The cause of the flood was the failure of the South Fork Dam. Sitting 14 miles upstream and several hundred feet above Johnstown, the dam held back the waters of Lake Conemaugh, which was a playground for the rich industrialists of Pittsburgh; including Mr. Carnegie. They knew the dam was defective. They’d been warned about it, and they even put a bit of money into repairing it. But they couldn’t be bothered to hire an engineer to oversee the work. It rained quite hard in central Pennsylvania that May of 1889. After several days of heavy rain, the dam broke and some 15 million cubic meters of water came crashing down on Johnstown. Imagine the intense pain that Mr. Carnegie must’ve felt over the loss of so many lives, and the fact that he was partly responsible. It was, as we said, that very next year that he started to give his money away. I don’t know if Carnegie ever admitted to the link between his guilt and his subsequent generosity, but it seems to me inconceivable that his suffering over the loss of so many lost lives did not have *some* impact on his subsequent commitment to philanthropy. Carnegie was still a successful businessman, but it was success with maybe a tear in his eye; because, you see, out of suffering comes especially *moral* success.

We are called to be faithful, not necessarily successful. And the key to being faithful is to follow Jesus. Which is to say that for the Christian, the route to success passes through suffering, and it begins with *surrender*: surrendering to God’s will as revealed in Jesus Christ; surrendering to the life of discipleship. What does scripture say? “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1). Unless we seek success as Jesus defines it, the success that may come our way will have little to do with a cross and an empty tomb. I can tell you about some churches that are packing the folks into the pews. When it comes to the numbers game, they are a complete success. But they don’t give a darn about the sick and the poor; about the lonely and the oppressed. But brothers and sister, Jesus cared about the sick and the poor and the lonely and the oppressed. I can tell you about churches that have been so successful at fundraising that they have money enough to keep going until the Kingdom comes; but they don’t have hardly anyone in the pews to hear the good news of God’s love. Brothers and sisters, Jesus came proclaiming good news, Jesus wants people to hear the good news, Jesus wants people to be the good news.

We need folks in the pews to be the church, but it’s not *primarily* about getting folks in the pews. We need money in the bank to do the work of ministry, but it’s not *primarily* about raising and managing money. Ministry is primarily about surrendering to the will of God, and walking in the way of Jesus Christ, and doing what you can with whatever resources God has given you, however small or large those resources may be. There are large churches doing faithful ministry and there are small churches doing faithful ministry. What matters most is not being successful in the numbers game, but being faithful. What matters is being willing to suffer through the process of letting go of what you no longer are called to do, and discerning what God *is* calling you to do. That takes hard work. And hard work hurts. But where there’s no pain, there’s no gain. And where there is no Cross, and no one who is willing to *bear* that Cross, there is no Church.

That doesn’t mean that doing ministry has to be a burden. If it feels like a burden, then let it go. But if it feels like pain that is part of a journey toward freedom, that is a cross that I will *gladly* bear. When I was running track in high school, the 3rd lap was always the hardest. 4 laps around the track make a mile, and the back stretch of that 3rd lap, running into a stiff breeze off Lake Michigan…I mean, talk about suffering! But I gladly bore that pain for the joy and the freedom of running that last lap, sprinting to the finish line, and winning the race. So if it’s simply a burden, let it go. But, if it’s the tough work of discerning what it is that we ought to be doing as disciples of Christ, then let’s do that tough work. Because on the other side of that cross of discernment, there is the joy and the freedom of new life.

And maybe we’ll be a growing church in that new life, or maybe we’ll bring in just enough new members to hold our own at something like our current numbers. The point is that we’ll be engaged in vital ministry. We’ll be doing what God has called us to do. We’ll be following Jesus into the future. It might not look like success in the short-term, but success as the world defines success isn’t all that it’s cracked-up to be. Just ask Andrew Carnegie. Jesus asked, “What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” Other churches may want to play the numbers game, but as for me, and I hope as for all of you whom I so dearly love, I hope that we have decided to follow Jesus. Amen.