

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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The Way of the Cross
Mark 8:27-38

Bad week for the Pope, eh?

There seems to be an inherent contradiction in that highest office,
being the one who can issue infallible decrees to the church.

It makes it very difficult to admit a mistake, let alone a sin.

Almost as hard as it is for Presidents and Kings

(only it is perhaps more understandable with Presidents and Kings
since they don't have confession of sin as a central plank
in their operating philosophy).

In case you haven't seen the news,

I'm talking about the recent speech of Pope Benedict
that has stirred up the anger of many Muslims around the world.

The Pope was making an appeal to Muslims and Christians
to enter into *reasonable* interfaith dialog,

a very noble thing to pursue, to be sure!

His point seemed to be that when divorced from the faculty of reason,
our faith soon begins to run contrary to the nature of God,
and thus contrary to true humanity in God's image.

The Pope quoted a 14th century Byzantine emperor who said,
referring to Islamic *jihad*,

"God is not pleased by blood,
and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature."

The Pope went on to quote the emperor,

who challenged the teaching of Islam saying,

"Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new,
and there you will find things only evil and inhuman,
such as his command to spread by the sword
the faith he preached."

The outcry from Muslims has been fairly broad-sweeping,
which is not all that surprising

given that the head of the Catholic Church

referred to the founder of the Islamic faith as "evil and inhuman" –

even if the Pope was merely quoting an ancient emperor
when these words escaped his lips.

It seems a bit counterproductive,

if you are seeking to establish a basis for interfaith dialogue,
to quote a source that totally discounts the religion of those
with whom you wish to talk.

On the other hand, the Pope's point
about the need to bring faith and reason together
is well taken.

It's just that his point would have been more reasonably accepted
had it not been laced with a harsh stereotype.

Unfortunately, the stereotype fits in some cases,
usually in the cases that make the news.

And in those cases, there is a disconnect between faith and reason:
as in the act of throwing a Molotov cocktail at a church
to protest the claim that your faith leads you to violence.

But we have to be careful – more careful than Benedict.
Just as the Christian world does not speak with one voice,
neither does the Muslim world.

We cannot lump all Muslims into the same category,
as if all of Islam is a warrior religion
or as if all Muslims are *jihadists*.
They are not.

Perhaps you are fortunate to know a few Muslims
to counter balance what you see on CNN.

I know, personally, in our own community,
a family of very reasonable, compassionate, peace-loving Muslims
who are horrified
by the way groups of Islamic extremists are using the Quran
to justify acts of terror and torture and murder.

Many, perhaps most, Muslims around the world
seek to hold faith and reason together,
and do not believe the Quran should be used to justify terrorism.

Both Islam and Christianity have sacred scriptures
on which we base our faith and our religious life.

We believe God speaks to us through these scriptures.

But our scriptures say many various and sometimes contradictory things.
In our own scriptures,

there are passages in the book of Joshua
in which God commands the Israelites to go into a Canaanite city
and kill every man, woman, and child
in order to cleanse the land of its non-Israelite inhabitants.

There could be, there have been and there are today,
some Christians who would read that and understand it to mean
that modern Christians should participate in ethnic cleansing.

But, I think it's safe to say, I hope it's safe to say,
that most of us in this sanctuary
do not believe that's what God wants of us.

And why not?

Because it's not reasonable for someone who follows Jesus.

We believe God calls us to walk in a way of life
that was embodied by Jesus.

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

It is always through the lens of our faith in Jesus
as the living Word of God, that we read the written word of God.

As we read our Bibles, we use our reason, our intellect,
to discern a way of life that is consistent with the portrayal of Jesus
as we have it in the Gospels.

That means we allow some parts of scriptures;
namely the accounts of Jesus words, deeds, and experiences
to have interpretive priority over other parts of scripture.

The reason we do this is that we believe Jesus Christ,
in all that he did and said and suffered,
reveals to us the true nature of God and the truly human life.

Simply put, for Christians, Jesus trumps Joshua.

If Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life for us,
then we must interpret Joshua
in a way that doesn't allow us to engage in mass murder
or ethnic cleansing.

And, by the way,

Muslims engage in a similar kind of discernment and reinterpretation
when they approach the reading of the Quran.

Some, tragically, are inspired by the words about *jihad*
(which means struggle) and take it to be a call to violence and terror,
while others, perhaps the majority,
are inspired by the words about peace and community,
and about Allah being compassionate and merciful.

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Having gotten all that off my chest,
about how we as Christians discern our way of life in the world,
we turn to our passage from Mark
which deals directly with this very question.

Mark says

Jesus and the disciples are *on the way* when Jesus asks them a question.

This word translated *the way* shows up several times in the Gospel of Mark and becomes symbolic of the life of discipleship.

Those who follow Jesus are *on the way*.

Later, in the Book of Acts,

the Way becomes a title for the growing Christian community.

Also in the Old Testament,

the Psalmist says, *Blessed is every one who...walks in the ways of the Lord.*

And in Exodus, God instructs Moses,

You shall teach them...and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do.

So, the disciples are following Jesus, *on the way*, learning what it means to live life Jesus' way, and he asks them

Who do people say that I am?

To which the disciples offer various responses they have heard,

John the Baptist...Elijah...a prophet...

Then he asks them,

But who do you say that I am?

Peter answers, quite easily:

You are the Messiah – that is, the long awaited king who will restore the kingdom to Israel.

After this bold answer, Peter gets a double whammy:

first, Jesus sternly orders them not to tell anyone who he is.

then, Jesus begins to describe his intention

to let his enemies have their way with him.

He makes it clear that he will more or less surrender

and give up his right to the throne.

Well, Peter is none too happy with this scenario,

quickly takes Jesus aside, let's Jesus have it,

and just as quickly wishes he hadn't opened his mouth,

because Jesus has just called him *Satan*.

The scene reminds us of the other Gospel story

in which Satan takes Jesus up on a high mountain

offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world

in exchange for his soul,

and Jesus says, "Forget it, Satan."

Here, Jesus does it again.

He turns down power. He gives up political advantage.

He chooses not to seek victory by the power of the sword.

But, instead, he allows violence to be used against him,
trusting that God will bring him through it.
He chooses the way of the cross, the way of weakness and humility,
and reveals it to be the way of salvation.

So, WWJD?

Given the choice between political strength and vulnerable weakness,
What would Jesus do?

Jesus chooses not to fight, not to wrest control of the situation.

If that's what Jesus would do, what then are we to do?

Jesus gets right to that:

*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.*

What could this mean for us?

What could it mean to walk in the way of the cross today?

It is interesting, that Jesus doesn't say his disciples must *be crucified*
but that they must *take up, or carry, their cross.*

To carry a Roman cross to the place of crucifixion
was a form of public humiliation, and public display of guilt.

Perhaps, then, to carry the cross

means for us to be open and honest about our brokenness, our sinfulness,
and not try to hide it behind pretentious religiosity.

Bonhoeffer taught that the Christian community
should not be a place where we are shocked to find sinful people,
but where the confession of sin is a sign of belonging
not a reason for exclusion.

To take up your cross is to voluntarily give up power;

it is to deny yourself what may rightly be yours,
not just for the sake of denial,

but for some larger purpose, for some greater love.

In the logic of the cross, having power over others corrupts human life.

Being powerless to influence or coerce others is the way to freedom.

This is a strange logic for a society, and a church, that is often
hell-bent on power:

the power to define purity and enforce standards of purity,
(the latest Presbyterian obsession)
the power to say who's in and who's out of membership,
of ordained office,
the power to protect ourselves from the Other
we do not know and do not understand
and therefore fear.

But Jesus calls us to the way of the cross.

All that Jesus said, did and endured shows us that Way.

It is not a way to impose our way on others

by force, or coercion, or violence,
or even by the power of our purity.

The way of the cross is the way of love that forbears and forgives all,

for the person in your life who sins against you,
but knows not what they do,

for the person who doesn't see it your way and never will,

for the person who is so different from you it makes your skin crawl,

for the person who condemns you, and even hates you,

and even perhaps wants to kill you.

The way of the cross, the way of Jesus, comes with a promise,
that the way to save your life is to lose it for Christ's sake.

If we say that Jesus is the Christ, the One who comes from God,
then our way must be the way of the cross

and it will require our highest reasoning and our deepest faith
to stay on the path, on the Way, with Jesus.

Peace be with you.