



Finding Christ, Finding Freedom

A sermon preached by Rev. Wilma Jakobsen
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I wonder how the first week or so of Lent has been for you? We are still early enough in the journey that we can remind ourselves that the journey of Lent is a journey of openness, handing ourselves over, or surrendering to the work of the Spirit within us and being open to what God wants to do in us and through us at this particular time. Martin Smith, monk and spiritual writer, says that Lent is “the season for the Spirit of truth, who drove Jesus into the wilderness to initiate him into the truth which sets free. . .that Lent is about the freedom which is gained only through exposure to the truth”, and by that he means the truth of who we are, the best and the worst, and also the truth of whose we are, beloved children of God, unconditionally loved just as we are now at this moment and for all time and beyond. This means that Lent is not so much about giving something up, or even taking something on, though either of those can be growthful steps to take. It is more about giving up control itself, letting go, and going on the journey not knowing where it will take us or how deep it will go.

The scripture readings for this point of the journey today are serious and challenging. No funny stories or intriguing parables or hopeful healings here. Mark’s gospel takes a serious turn precisely at this point in chapter 8, which is halfway through the gospel. In the first half, the narrator has showed us that God’s rule, God’s reign has begun. This second half of the gospel shows that Jesus was fully aware of his fate and instructed the disciples about his coming suffering and death. To put the story in it’s context, in the passage just before today’s reading, we read the story of Peter’s high moment when he really gets it for once, as he names Jesus as the Messiah, the Chosen One. His high moment does not last too long though and he soon reverts to his usual foot-in-mouth scenario, as he rebukes Jesus for talking about his coming suffering and death.

Aren’t so many of us like Peter? Peter, like most of the Jewish people of his time, expected the Messiah to be a warrior-king who would conquer the Romans with military might and liberate the Jews from Roman domination and imperialism. Suffering and torture and death were not in the equation, as Peter understood it. Jesus’ response to Peter was not particularly caring or pastoral, he rebukes him and goes on to say that following him is no easy deal but involves taking up the cross, the instrument of execution, it means giving up one’s life, in fact losing one’s life if one is truly to find one’s life, or, one’s true self.

In other words, following Christ is not all about an easy option, blessings only, or a smooth, easy journey. The blessings of God’s reign of unconditional love come with the possibility of persecution from those who oppose it. Like Peter, we can sometimes slip into thinking that life with Jesus will be a journey of continued, victorious liberation, a smooth

journey without any road bumps, or at least not too many large bumps. Then when difficulties come our way, we slip into wondering where God is, whether God has abandoned us or does not love us as we thought, as we mistakenly think that if God loves us, then our journey will be relatively easy.

This does not mean that the passage is an automatic call to suffering no matter what. One of the early pioneers of feminist theology, Joanna Dewey, has an excellent article in which she says that this passage, when read and understood in the context of the first century cultural world and the larger narrative of Mark's gospel, is not an exhortation to suffering and victimage in general. "It is an exhortation to remain faithful to Jesus and the rule of God in face of persecution, even execution, by political authorities. While the end of much human suffering is realized by the breaking of the rule of God into history in Jesus' ministry, persecution for following Jesus is a real possibility as long as this age lasts".

There's a story of a courageous, inspiring woman named Sheila Cassidy that illustrates this well. It's written in her book, *Audacity to Believe*, that I read many years ago and it had a profound affect on me. Sheila Cassidy was a British doctor who went to practice medicine in Chile in the 1970s. In 1975, she was caught up in the violence of the Pinochet regime. At the request of the friends she had made who were involved in anti-government activities, she gave medical care to a political activist who was on the run from the police. Because of this, she was herself arrested by the Chilean secret police and kept in custody without trial. She was severely tortured in order to force her to disclose information about her patient and her other contacts. On her release from prison she returned to England, and spoke out about her experiences.. She did much to bring to the attention of the British public the widespread human right abuses that were occurring at the time in Chile. What struck me so much about her story, she had no plans to be an activist, she was no hero in search of a mission or martyrdom. She was shy and described herself as apolitical. Yes she had a sense of vocation that she had followed in becoming a doctor. When she signed up, she had no idea of the directions her life would take, the suffering she would endure. Yet as she lived out her life, she responded step by step as her life unfolded.

It was because of activist friends she made in Chile that she reconnected with the church. She said, "I met some American priests and started to become aware of a very different kind of church from the one I had abandoned -- all the pious crap becomes swept away -- I remember going for lunch with them, ... it was a shock to find someone of my own sort living so sparsely, living among the people, hiding those on the run; I saw the church as it should be for the first time in my life -- I know I wanted to be part of the church that fought for the oppressed, although I didn't see myself as being that kind of person." Again in her words, "I was preparing to enter a convent then I was asked by a Jesuit whether I would treat a man on the run, ... I treated him for a bullet in his leg. A week later I was arrested; they broke into the house and shot the maids dead - I was picked up, blindfolded and driven off. It is very difficult to explain what it was like -- the sense of disbelief, that it must be a terrible mistake... I was made to strip and tied to an iron bedstead and tortured with electric shocks to find where I had treated this guy -- it was difficult to think between the shocks. And I told them toward the end of the night who the people were and they stopped and tied me in a room for three days... I was moved to a place of solitary confinement for three weeks and then to a women's prison camp for five weeks. First I prayed for release, but then I found another way -- to say to God do with me what you want -- it is not easy -- to say to God do

with me what you want -- it is not easy – to hand over one’s life as a blank check to God...I was able to hand the check over and not snatch it back -- and I have not taken it back since.

I have had deep peace --- not on the surface, but deep down I have had peace.” When she was released because of all the international pressure, she was not intending to speak out about her experience but was directly challenged by the leader of the prison camp to do so, and she realized that all the women in the camp were relying on her for their lives, so she felt compelled to speak out publically and did so.

So many times it is like that for us. We may have what Sheila Cassidy called ‘blank check moments’ when we offer all of whom we have to God in surrender to wherever the call takes us. Yet we probably have far more moments that are step by step, small responses to the communities in which we live, the relationships which connect us, the actions we take, steps that take us forward in following the way of Jesus, losing our lives in order to find them. Sometimes it’s not our intention or will to do something, but like Sheila Cassidy, a situation that pushes us to respond, that drives us to act in solidarity with another who is suffering, to take a step towards losing one’s life, to living more simply, to giving all we have to Christ as a blank check and trusting that the way forward will open up.

Perhaps you are listening and saying well that’s an exceptional story, so let’s think of the reality of our lives and our situations. Sheila Cassidy was an ordinary woman, a shy, apolitical doctor whose life was unimaginably changed. What are the situations that change us, that drive us to lose our selves, or what we think our selves are, and actually to find our true selves? We can think of so many people we know facing unthinkable situations that lead to loss of all that is familiar or is valuable to us, much of what we think we need to live our lives. There are those facing the crunch because of the economic crisis, who have lost jobs or had their hours cut, who’ve lost their homes, whose lives have been indelibly changed. There are those facing terminal illness, for themselves or in their family, the unthinkable breaking through into reality, forcing them to live each day focused on what is truly important, having to face a loss that is devastating. There are so many unthinkable situations that people face. How on earth does anyone do that? And yet so many do, and in the experience, discover that one can only do so day by day, moment by moment, sometimes though probably not always remembering that in every situation we have the freedom to choose to trust, to trust God’s love in the midst of death, God’s presence in the midst of loss, in the midst of losing what one was sure one needed in order to live, and then discovering another way.

Lent is a time of letting go, or in the words of today’s gospel, of losing one’s life in order to find it...and that can be in the large ways or in smaller discoveries of who we are as we face the daily challenges and opportunities of our lives. How do we pray in these times? How do we pray in the context of Jesus’ inviting us to follow him and to lose our lives in order to find our true selves?

Peter Van Breemen, in his book “The God Who Won’t Let us Go,” offers us a helpful image of how we can pray and approach the possibility of letting go, using the image of open hands. He says, “Over the years, we have all gathered a great deal in our hands – perhaps with great effort – and naturally we want to hold onto all of it. We hold modern conveniences that make our lives easier. We cling to convictions and opinions, thoughts and ideas. We treasure relationship, of course. And we hold in our hands work, appointments, calendar,

position, reputation, influence and so much more. We hold on. We are not willing to give them up so lightly. We have expended considerable energy accumulating all these precious things.

When we pray, we open our hands. It is not necessary to empty them. The point is simply to remain before God with our hands wide open, waiting. God also shows much patience. After some time God may come and look lovingly at what we hold. "You have a lot," God says. Yes, we answer, that is certainly true, We have much, probably much more than we ourselves realise. Then God may look at us directly and ask, "Is it alright with you if I take this out?" Do not be afraid. God is gentle, God can never harm. You can be sure of that. On the other hand, God knows how to choose. The fundamental stance of prayer remains, "Yes you may take whatever you choose." We can agree because we know that God loves us more than we love ourselves and that God would never take anything from us if it were to harm us.

After God has taken that one thing, we remain in God's presence. If after a while God comes again, we may feel a bit nervous. God asks, "is it alright if I put this in your hand and entrust it to you? God never takes without also giving. Once again, the bottom line in our prayer is, "yes you may." In this way we let God be God, or at least have the desire to let God be God.

Perhaps that is the attitude, the desire we can seek this lent as we continue the journey of letting go, of surrendering to the work of the Spirit in us. The invitation is to say OK God, yes you may. Yes you may do what you want in my life, I am open. Only hold my hand while it's happening that I may know you are with me, your strength will be there for me and I do not face this alone. Yes you may, invite me to lose what I think is my life so that I can find my true life, my true self. Yes you may, use me to change a situation that seems unchangeable. Yes, you may.

Let's close with a prayer: *God give us the audacity to believe, to trust in your love no matter what, to respond to your invitation this lent wherever that takes us, to lose ourselves that we may find who we truly are, to lose our lives that we may find our true selves. Amen.*