

*Ready for a Change: Giving Up Ourselves for Lent*

Mark 8: 31-38

Whitefish UMC

Second Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2009

- † The title of David James Duncan’s novel, *The Brothers K* refers, of course, to the novel by Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. But it also applies to the “K” of a baseball strikeout (that’s the symbol you mark on your program if you’re keeping score).
- † Improbably, though, the “K” also refers to the cross of Jesus. Everett, one of the brothers K, offers his own definition of “K,” a good insight into the scripture we just heard this morning. Listen:
- † *K (Ka) verb. K’ed, K’ing. 1. baseball: to strike out. 2. to fail, to flunk, to fizzle, or ...9. to lose your home, your innocence, your balance, your friends, 10. to lose your happiness, your hopes, your leisure, your looks, and yea, even your memories, your vision, your mind, your way, 11. in short (and as Jesus K. Rist once so uncompromisingly put it) to lose your very self, 12. for the sake of another, is 13. sweet irony, the only way you’re ever going to save it.*
- † *The Brothers K* tells the story of the Chance family as they pass through the turbulent waters of Papa Chance’s minor league baseball career and the upheavals of the Vietnam War. Papa Chance is a former pitcher who has settled down with his wife and six children in the mill town of Camas, Washington.
- † The novel unfolds as each of the children tells their family story from their own particular point of view. Duncan’s characters unveil

- themselves and their quest for their individual identities as the tension in the family is revealed. They are competitive and play off of each other's strengths and weaknesses.
- † In their quest for “self”, the siblings often lose sight of what is most important—for Duncan, the core of identity ought to be love for others and relationship to God. It's a wonderful book, whether you're a follower of Jesus or not. (Most people who love the book tend to be environmentalists, fishermen, and young adults). But it's especially important if you seek to follow Jesus, as Duncan does (even though he's not very fond of church).
  - † And if you want to follow, to understand Jesus, today's passage from Mark's gospel is perhaps the most significant of everything Jesus said. It's also the most difficult, the most paradoxical.
  - † Jesus said, “If any want to become my follower, 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.”
  - † He says this in the middle of his story. Jesus and his companions have been in Galilee, visiting and teaching, and everything was going well so far. Evidences of the reign of God abounded in the life and work of Jesus. His friends had watched with excitement as Jesus cast out demons, healed the sick, cleansed and included the lepers, and taught with authority.
  - † Jesus had calmed a storm, raised a young girl to life, fed the multitudes, walked on water, opened the eyes of the blind, made the deaf to hear. These acts of God's power were only the foretaste of the

coming end to suffering, poverty, and oppression of every kind.

Right?

- † But then Jesus throws cold water on the disciples' expectations and exhilarations. He tells them of his own coming suffering, death, and resurrection. How can this be, exclaims Peter, arguably Jesus' best friend.
- † But all Peter gets for his loyalty and protests is a slap of the worst kind. Jesus calls his best friend "Satan," for Pete's sake!
- † Can we even imagine how Peter must have felt? It's as if Jesus has turned into a completely different person. He's turned away from Galilee and towards Jerusalem.
- † He had never mentioned a cross before. Peter and the companions knew what a cross was—the horrible method Rome used to execute traitors and troublemakers, a very effective means of keeping order and peace.
- † "Take up a cross?" Surely Jesus was joking, just trying to test them. Someone once said that you couldn't find a more difficult marketing strategy than that. "Take up a cross and lose your life" is hardly a way to foster church growth.
- † Which is why some of the fastest growing churches don't even have a cross in sight. Instead there are churches designed like shopping malls to meet your every need, including fancy coffee, Krispy Kreme Donuts, and smoothies. Most of the sermons are geared toward improving your personal life—how to raise your children, have a good marriage, grow your business, invest your money, reduce your debt.

- † Now, there's nothing wrong with any of that. It's important to take care of yourself and to meet your needs. The problem is that's not what Jesus was about. He certainly didn't focus much on himself; he asked his followers to minister to others. Serving others was his main thing.
- † When I was growing up in the sixties, Sammy Davis Jr. sang this song called "I've Gotta Be Me." Because it was the sixties, it was very popular. It goes, in part, like this:
  - Whether I'm right or whether I'm wrong,
  - Whether I find a place in this world or never belong,
  - I've gotta be me...
  - As long as there's a chance that I can...have it all
  - I'll go it alone. That's how it must be...I've gotta be me!
- † Contrast those words with these: "If you would follow me," Jesus said, "deny yourself and take up a cross."
- † My friend Dave McConnell quotes Mark Twain, who was not conventionally religious but did understand the New Testament. He said: "Just be yourself" is the worst possible advice you can give people."
- † We are made up of many selves, and if we let ourselves be our most self-absorbed self, we won't do ourselves any favors. Psychologists know that there is convincing evidence that Jesus was on to something when he talked about losing your life to find it. Too much self-reflection is not a good thing—it leads to analysis paralysis.
- † John Buchanan cites Professor Timothy Wilson, quoting the poet Theodore Roethke: *self contemplation is a curse/that makes an old confusion worse.*

- † He described a recent study in which “mildly depressed college students were asked to spend eight minutes thinking about themselves or to spend the same amount of time thinking about mundane topics like ‘clouds forming in the sky.’
- † People in the first group, thinking about themselves, focused on negative things in their lives and sunk into a worse mood. People in the other group actually felt better afterward, possible because the negative self-focus was turned off by the distraction task.”
- † Of course Jesus wasn’t much into distraction, either. But as your pastor, I know what social scientists are learning, too, that the best way to feel better about yourself is to forget about yourself and worry about something or somebody else.
- † Simply doing an act of kindness for others can improve your own outlook on life. John Stuart Mill, centuries ago, observed “those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind.”
- † But ultimately, following Jesus is not about finding our happiness. It is about knowing the deep and abiding joy of living for something to which you are willing to give your life away.
- † But why would anyone follow a Christ who is to be crucified? We have enough suffering and rejection without following a Savior who asks us to give ourselves away.
- † We follow him because only a crucified Savior reveals God as a suffering, vulnerable God. In Jesus is the fellow sufferer who understands. And that’s not the kind of God we really want, is it?

- † We want an invincible God, a Super God, who shields us from our own vulnerability. We want a powerful God who gives us some of that power if we worship Him.
- † Strength in weakness, gaining by losing, the power of the cross—that all seems foolishness to those who measure strength by the Dow Jones, by the accumulation of things, by the comfort of their lives.
- † But Jesus bears witness to another God—one who hears the cries of the poor, who defends the orphans and widows and immigrants, a God who suffers with the people, a God who comes among us as a vulnerable baby, born among the homeless, lived among outcasts, compared receiving the kingdom to a little child.
- † This from an incarnate God who was executed as a criminal, buried in a borrowed tomb, and even when he was raised from the dead was mistaken for a grave robber and a beach comber.
- † Let me be clear: Jesus didn't think that there was something inherently noble in suffering and loss. He simply asks us to bear witness to the Gospel. He doesn't ask us to suffer and lose ourselves just for the sake of suffering and loss.
- † No he asks us to follow him to the cross for the sake of love; for we know that sacrificial love is what gives us real life. God holds nothing back in order to show us how much we are loved, not even God's son.
- † Our deepest need isn't self-fulfillment, after all. It is to know this kind of love and to live it, so that we can find our truest and best self by finding a way, for the love of God, to give our lives away.
- † Bishop William Willimon tells of a time when he visited new parents in the hospital. The doctor entered the room and didn't mince words:

“Your baby is afflicted with severe Down’s Syndrome. I had expected this, but things were too far along before I could say for sure.”

- † “Is the baby healthy,” the mother asked. “That’s what I wanted to discuss with you,” the doctor said. “The baby is healthy, except for the problem. However, it does have a slight, rather common respiratory ailment. My advice is that you let me take it off the respirator—that might solve things. At least it’s a possibility.”
- † “It’s not a possibility for us,” they said together.
- † “I know how you feel,” responded the doctor, trying to spare the parents from a lifetime of sacrifice. “But you need to think about what you’re doing. You already have two beautiful kids. Statistics show that people who keep these babies risk a higher incidence of divorce and family problems. Is it fair to do this to the children you already have? Is it right to bring this suffering into your family?”
- † “Suffering?” the mother said quietly. “We appreciate your concern, but we’re Christians. God suffered for us, and we will try to suffer for the baby, if we have to.”
- † “Pastor, I hope you do something for them,” the doctor whispered to me outside their door as he continued his rounds.
- † Two days later, the doctor and I watched the couple leave the hospital. They walked slowly, carrying a small bundle; but it seemed a heavy burden to us, a weight on their shoulders. We felt as if we could hear them dragging, clanking it down the front steps of the hospital, moving slowly into a cold, gray, March morning.

- † “It will be too much for them,” the doctor said, with much kindness and concern. “You ought to have talked them out of it. You should have helped them to understand.”
- † “But as they left,” Willimon writes, “I noticed a curious look on their faces; they looked as if the burden were not heavy at all, as if it were a privilege and a sign. They seemed borne up, as if on another’s shoulders, being carried toward some high place the doctor and I would not be going, following a way we did not understand.”
- † It’s a beautiful story. But we know that it doesn’t mean that a given-away life is an easy one. But the joy and the power God gives us when we offer ourselves to love and in love makes it possible.
- † Are you ready for this change? Will you give yourselves up for Lent—and for your life?
- † Amen.

Sources:

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