

## The Road Most Traveled

sermon digest

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Mark 8:31-38

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It was almost two decades ago. I was attending a conference in another city when I received a call in the early evening from the hospital in Oak Ridge. The nurse informed me that an elderly member of my church had been admitted to the hospital in critical condition. His only living relative, his son Mike had been notified and was on the way to Oak Ridge from Virginia, but I was listed on his file as his pastor, and the nurse thought that I ought to know. I thanked her for the call and asked to be kept informed as I made plans to return home. About an hour later, I received a second call. It was a strange message. The same nurse said, "Mr. Brown is no longer in pain." When I asked what she meant, she would only repeat the same message, "Mr. Brown is no longer in pain." Finally it dawned on me that she was letting me know that Ruben's life had come to an end. Hospital policy required that the death of a patient could not be released without first notifying the next of kin. Mike was still on the road.

I thought of the irony of that word. Ruben had been in pain for many years. For many years he had struggled with alcohol addiction and had been my ready contact for AA when I needed to make a referral. Since his wife Irene's death, he had lived alone with his grief and a debilitating heart condition that was both painful and life-threatening. Yes, I thought, Ruben's pain has come to an end; but, notwithstanding a painful life, he had been a productive citizen, a companion to fellow alcoholics, a faithful member of the church, and a good friend. Not all pain is bad. Pain is a sign of life, a good thing. As most of us know too well, pain seems to go with the progression of life. The older we get, the more aches and pains we tend to develop. Suffering and life seem to go together.

***Suffering is a part of life.*** The only senior adults in our St. Louis congregation was a couple in early retirement. Mack shocked us one evening at church by announcing that he suffered from a terminal condition. He appropriately allowed everyone time to gasp and mumble. Then he declared the nature of his terminal condition—old age! Mack had come to terms with his mortality. I think that he was saying to his friends that death, even suffering, is a part of life. All of life is good, even the end.

Jesus, Son of Man—we might say "child of humanity"—was one of us. He suffered like any other human person, not just the physical pain of cuts and bruises, but the spiritual and emotional agony of being abandoned by friends, and at the end feeling abandoned by God. Early Christians did not take his death lightly. They could not come up with simple, ready answers, theological rationalizations that made crucifixion an acceptable end to a beautiful life.

In one sense, the cross was a scandal; God did not rescue Jesus from the cross. Of all the people who had ever lived on earth Jesus was one person who lived close enough to God to be called "Son of God." Surely he would be spared from death. Certainly, he would not be allowed to suffer the death of a common criminal. On the other hand, the cross was a dimension of the bigger question, why does anyone suffer? Why is suffering—physical, mental, emotional anguish—as basic to human life, actually to all animal life, as breathing, eating and drinking? With apologies to Scott Peck for the distortion of his book title, suffering is indeed, "The Road Most Traveled."

The eighth chapter of Mark is the center point of the Gospel. From here to the end of the story, Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem and the cross. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked the disciples, "who do people say that I am?" He followed with the more personal question, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter was the one who declared, "You are the Messiah." But that high moment in the Gospels contained an afterthought, the statement of Jesus that the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected, and killed. This is the first of three statements of Jesus in the Gospels predicting his suffering and death.

Poor Peter. He went from being the hero of the hour to being the personification of evil, the Satan. Peter "rebuked" Jesus, as Jesus had "rebuked" the wind. It was a verb used for casting out demons. But who among us does not understand Peter? Somehow Peter expected Jesus to be immune from the normal bumps and bruises of life. Jesus had the secret of eternal life. If anyone knew where to hide from the pain of the world, he did. Didn't Enoch of ancient times skip death? Of all people who walk the face of this planet surely this man was immune from the ills of the rest of humanity. Suffering and death on a cross can be avoided. The fact that John the Baptist had just been served

up on a platter might have been expected, given his weird lifestyle and obnoxious manners.

I suspect that a big part of Peter's problem was not just about Jesus. It was about Peter. If God will allow Jesus to suffer and die on a cross, what possible hope do we have of escape? But Jesus anticipates the issue: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." According to tradition, Peter himself was crucified in Rome. He was crucified upside down by his own request, unworthy to be crucified like his Lord.

Our first Lenten season together as church was in 2004. You may recall that the traditional observance of Lent in the churches that year was overshadowed by the release of a movie directed by Mel Gibson "The Passion of the Christ." The actor Mel Gibson's reputation for blood and gore was enhanced by his innovations and interpretations of the death of Jesus. In a *New York Times* review, A.O. Scott wrote: "By rubbing our faces in the grisly reality of Jesus' death and fixing our eyes on every welt and gash on his body, this film means to make literal an event that the Gospels often treat with circumspection and that tends to be thought about somewhat abstractly."

The Gospels did not have to play up the blood and gore of the cross to make it real to first century Christians. The reality of Rome's sadistic cruelty was known all too well by every Jew, indeed by people in every occupied territory; but the fact remains that the death of Jesus, especially his death on the cross, was a major obstacle for early Christians. All of the subsequent generations have continued to struggle with, not only the necessity of his death, but the theological necessity of his suffering.

***Unjust, unnecessary, human inflicted suffering offends both our faith and our reason.*** Peter followed a rationale that still bounces around the common wisdom about suffering. It was the nemesis faced by Job: the idea that people get what they deserve in life. Peter was so appalled at the prophecy of a suffering Christ because he came right out of the community that attributed all suffering to divine punishment for sin. The Jewish logic is not so strange. If God is God, then all events must be under the control of the Omnipotent, all-powerful, Lord of the universe. If suffering is a part of life, then it must be under the control of the Omnipotent God and make sense. If suffering is reasonable, it must be punishment for sin.

You can begin to see why Peter was so blustery. The suffering of Jesus could only be punishment for sin. For centuries Christians continued to struggle with Peter over the suffering of Jesus. It had to make sense only as Jesus became the sin of the world who had to be punished by a just and holy God. It was the old "scapegoat" idea that sins could be transferred to a goat released in the wilderness to become the prey for all the demons of hell. It was formalized in numerous ways. From the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury's concept is still around. In his famous book *Cur Deus Homo? Why Did God Become Man?* Anselm offered his satisfaction theory that the suffering of Jesus satisfied the justice of God.

We have extended that logic into our penal institutions in which we still attempt to exactly measure an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Parents have followed the Old Testament adage, "spare the rod and spoil the child." We have the largest per capita prison population in the world in this nation, but I don't see here a cure to the problem of criminal behavior. Beaten children just become beating parents at some time in their lives. The attempt to exact justice through pain for an imperfect, unjust people is a miserable failure.

I find myself in the uncomfortable position of standing with Peter. The problem of unnecessary suffering inflicted on the innocent did not end at the cross of Jesus or of Peter. More than a million refugees in Syria today, victims of an unthinkable evil, is not new to our world. Every time I open these pages of question in the road to the cross, I have to acknowledge that crosses still dot the landscape of our world. Certainly, we cannot avoid the reality of pain and suffering, and none of us can escape the certainty of death, but we do not have to be part of the problem, and we do not have to be tolerant of the evil that continues to plague the babies of our world.

I don't have a rationale for the suffering of Christ or of the people I have met in hospitals and funeral homes struggling with the pain of life. I am certain that the crucified Christ is one with us. God is not up there somewhere above it all. God is in our lives, bearing the pain, leading the way for the redemption of his world.