

Unconditional Surrender

Mark 8:27-38

Northminster Presbyterian Church

September 13, 2015

(While pretending to type on the screen)

"To: The Boss, From: Me. Regarding: The texts for today.

Dear Sir or Madam, today is Banner Sunday at Northminster.

It's a joyful fun day of new beginnings for our program year...

my first here, you might remember. So. I was wondering just

why we have these two particular texts...Isaiah talking about

being insulted and spat upon for following you...and then this

little church marketer's dream "let them deny themselves, and

take up their cross and follow me...For those who want to save

their life will lose it."

I sincerely hope that you can see the problem here....these

are not exactly...happy, happy joy, joy texts....Not exactly texts

to pack the pews, if you get my drift. Thought you should

know...perhaps you could do something about that for next

year...All the best, Me."

Okay...now where were we....Oh right....Sermon.

Seriously...today as we begin a new program year...as we

move into a more active chapter of our new ministry together...

even as we prepare for next week's formal installation service...

Isaiah and Jesus have challenging words for us.

What was it Isaiah said....with great power and confidence

and the end of the passage Jessica just read?..."Let us stand up

together."

It reminded me of someone else who said something with great

power and confidence. His words were "Everyone who can

stand, Stand now...if you can help others, do so." He was a stranger in the smoke of the 86th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center. That's what Judy Wein, remembered about him...that and a red bandana around his nose and mouth.

He helped her to the only stairwell still intact after the second plane smashed into the south tower on September 11th 14 years ago...all told in multiple trips he carried or guided more than a dozen folks down 15 flights of stairs...handing them off to firefighters with access to a working elevator..

He was equities trader Welles Crowther. Months after 9/11 his body was recovered next to a half dozen New York Firefighters.... he had stayed in the building working with them...rescuing as many as they could for as long as they could.

Even with the 9/11 anniversary though, in the recent news stories that have echoed today's texts it is not Mr. Crowther who the pundits are lifting up as one who is taking up his cross...No, if you are looking for a contemporary example of someone standing up against popular opinion and someone who is being described as taking up her cross and following Jesus in WAY too many blogs and interviews these last few weeks...It has been Kim Davis, the Rowan County Clerk in Kentucky who was briefly jailed for refusing to issue marriage licenses, one of the jobs of her office, asserting that if she issued any licenses, she would have to issue them to same-sex couples whose relationships offend her particular strongly held religious beliefs. Ms. Davis is hero to many...but to many others...well, not so much.

With two such starkly different examples...it's enough to make you wonder...What is Jesus talking about today...what is Jesus calling us to...knowing that being a faithful Christian will make you unpopular and hated? I certainly hope not, because that promotes an idea of Christian victimization that just doesn't jive with the Jesus that I worship and follow.

So what are we to do with all of this?

Perhaps a step backwards is in order.

What's going on in the lives of Jesus and the disciples as we approach this story in Caesarea Philippi today?

Chronologically, we are nearing the end of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee...something that has gone on for the better part of three years. And where they are appears to be no coincidence. Caesarea Philippi is in the foothills of the Bible's Mount Hermon...(the area we call the Golan Heights today). It gives one a view across Galilee towards Jerusalem. Scholar Lamar Williamson says, "In the text, Jesus invites his disciples to look back across the Galilean ministry and reflect on who he is, then to look ahead and understand that they are 'on the way' not only to Caesarea Philippi, but also to Jerusalem." We know what awaits there—persecution, arrest, and death...even if at this point the disciples don't.

Caesarea is also the place where the followers of the Roman political cult gather to worship Caesar...the one who is identified on the coins of the day as the Son of God. In the shadow of the temple to the worldly son of God, Jesus wants to know who the people say HE is.

And the disciples..freshly back from their first mission trip without Jesus tell him....they think you're a prophet, maybe even Elijah or John the Baptist come back to life...and then

Jesus leans in and asks them who THEY think he is.

Peter is like that kid in class whose hand flies into the air when the teacher asks a question he knows the answer to...this is one of the things I love about Peter because, well, I was that kid in school. And Peter gets it right and wrong.

Peter gets it right that Jesus is the Christ...the Messiah... but his response to Jesus telling them what that means shows he has it all wrong. Jesus tells them to prepare for the hatred and struggle and death that is coming for the Messiah..and Peter tries to shut him up...revealing that his view of the Messiah is one who is strong...a political leader...in other words the view that most Messianic Jews had during the first Century. The Messiah was the one who would come and defeat the Romans, re-establish the kingdom of David...and Jesus is messing it all up...talking about self-denial and crosses and death.

And if we're honest, aren't we uncomfortable with his language too...not just because it isn't designed to fill the pews with joyful worshippers, but because well...death...and crosses....it is..well it's just a bit much...

Still...Reformed movement founder John Calvin wrote that self-denial was the sum of the Christian life. But a number of great feminist theologians remind us that this kind of language has also been used to keep women and the powerless in oppressive situations for much of the church's history. So is there a way to look at self-denial and self-offering in a way that isn't self-destructive acquiescence to violation, neglect, or oppression?

What if giving up one's life and taking up the cross isn't so much being victimized... but recognizing that our call is for

complete surrender... not to earthly powers of oppression or sexism or hatred...but complete surrender of the lives we might lead if we live by the rules of Caesar?

Jesus stands in the shadow of a city that is a temple to earthly power and looks toward Jerusalem...and decides to go... not because he has a death wish, but despite the fact that he knows that the powers that be will not, cannot, tolerate his message of love over domination, mutuality over exploitation, hospitality over class distinctions, grace over orthodoxy....cannot tolerate that message because their world is built upon those death-dealing principles.

What if taking up the cross is being more like Welles Crowther...being keenly aware of the gifts and talents and abilities we have been given...and offering them and our very selves for others...even at the risk of our very existence?

What if taking up the cross is not being willing to face public ridicule because you insist that everyone believe or behave in the way you believe is proper...but is instead... choosing the path that surrenders what we want...for what God's world needs from us.

What if our challenge, in this time, in this world that lifts up ambition, glory, winning at any cost, is to embody a different way of living? And through it we learn it's not all about us, through it we learn that setting aside one's own dreams to help someone else live theirs is not stupid, but precious. Through it we know that giving up one's own time and money and effort not for what we want, but so that others may live most fully is not ridiculous, it is holy....

We're not surrendering our humanity.. we're surrendering a way of living that is inhuman...We're surrendering a way of

life that says I am more important than US...that My dreams and hopes must take precedence over yours...

What if...in every new beginning...whether it's the beginning of a program year, the beginning of a ministry together...if we want to follow Jesus, we recognize at the outset that we will joyfully set out on a journey that will indeed cost us our lives....oh probably not our physical lives...but the lives we might otherwise live...if we chose Caesar's temple over following Jesus.

Because following Jesus means we follow one who did not seek to triumph in earthly terms...but instead chose to triumph by proving that death...and earthly power itself, were in fact powerless...that Caesar's way---the way that says might makes right, that says you can never be good enough (or smart enough or pretty enough or wealthy enough), that says vulnerability is a sign of weakness—is the real way of death...and letting go of that way of living, of that life...is the only way to truly live.

It means we live another life...a life that says the church doesn't exist for us...but for Jesus Christ and his world...that says our ministries are not designed so that we feel good about what we have done—though we hope that happens—but so that what we do and say and embody to our neighbors and the world is good news—is a beacon of hope, grace, hospitality and peace.

Unconditional Surrender in this context sounds an awful lot like "Everyone who can stand, Stand now...if you can help others, do so." Amen.