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St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Jesus says, "I'll Go First"

Mark 8:31-38 NRSV, emended —*[After Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah] Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. But, turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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. "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life! "Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes with the holy angels in the glory of his Father."*

Jesus and his disciples are on their multi-region preaching and teaching tour. Jesus often took time on the tour bus to deepen the lessons he was teaching in the synagogues and to the crowds. He taught in the typical way of rabbis at that time. He would lead the disciples through a series of question - going from questions whose answers had been memorized to more and more difficult questions. It is a little bit like being a student of the sciences. First you complete labs with a known procedure and easy-to-obtain outcome, then more difficult labs, and then after many years of education you finally ask your own questions and design the experiment to see if your hypothesis was right. On this day, Jesus had progressed quickly, it seems, through the known questions on his way to a big one: "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples throw out different answers, but Peter is the one who gets it right - mostly. He says to Jesus, you are the Messiah. And Jesus is like, "Yes, and...this is what it means: It means triumph only after suffering and death. And I'll go first."

And, like I said a couple of weeks ago, we're so used to the cross and to this whole story that we sometimes miss the power of it. For example, which of us would knowingly take on a path, a career, a project if we knew the only way we'd complete it would be once it had taken our soul—well, all of us—our complete being? Which of us professed our faith at our confirmation or at our baptism understanding that our faith demands nothing less of us than complete surrender? It is, truly, a little bit foolish. Wouldn't we like our faith to give us all the keys to success? But today we get a cross - the opposite of success. Jesus asks us to take up our cross and follow him, to go the way that he goes: triumph only after suffering and death. And by triumph, I mean, in the words of St. Paul, new creation. Change. Resurrection. Transformation

None of us would knowingly walk down this road, but all of us want what is at the end. What Jesus offers us is a road map that allows us to make our lives the pathway to change. Jesus doesn't ask us to seek out a cross, but to take it up. Your cross - your suffering and your death - is not far from you. It is the pain you hold and which you often, in ways you regret, transmit to others. It is the way the worst things that were said to you you now say to your kids. It is the way you lose your temper at work. It is the way you, deep down, believe yourself unlovable and so never really make connections anymore. It is the pain of being passed up for promotion so you work harder and harder but never quite feel fulfilled. It is that quiet grief you never tell anyone about. It is the fear, not the faith, that guides your life. But there is another way: transformation.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, once wrote, "I've often said that great love and great suffering (both healing and woundedness) are the universal, always available paths to transformation because they are the only things strong enough to take away the ego's protections and pretensions. Great love and great suffering bring us back to God." It isn't that you need to be pain-free, fear-free, doubt-free. You don't need to be perfectly patient, perfectly persistent, perfectly peaceful. It is that you are willing to let the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus be the guide for your life.

When Jesus accepted Peter's answer, what he was trying to convey to Peter was that being the Messiah isn't about being the best—*being* first—but *going* first. In equating Jesus with the Messiah, with the Christ, we find something that Rohr calls the Universal Christ. We remember that the second person of the trinity is co-eternal with God. In the cross, in what we believe about the Christ, is this mystery that there is no pain you will feel, no grief, no suffering that Christ did not face. Christ went first.

And so, beloved, in following Jesus we are free to transform pain. So often I think this is what is hardest to believe, not some fancy theological concept, but exactly where the rubber meets the road - that the cross, the Christ, matter to *our* lives. That the Christ, the cross, actually matter when we've failed, when we've fallen, when we've faltered, not because the cross is our indictment - the final moment when God points the finger at us and our pain and our shame and our guilt, but that the cross is our redemption, the place where we can be transformed by our pain.

Some years ago, I wrote about what I call the "ordinary, holy time" of sitting vigil with a beloved who is dying. Those of us who embark on this kind of vigil, who take up this cross, will be blessed to see the ultimate transformation of pain, the ultimate triumph of life over death. When I was a hospice chaplain we often talked about the work the dying needed to do. Most of the time the work was transforming their pain - by confession, by the giving of gifts in their own grief to those they love, to setting their affairs in order to aid their families or to contribute to something bigger. It is holy work.

Transformative work like this, Beloved, is also the everyday work of Christians - of transforming pain. We do this by confessing our failures and seeking forgiveness - not just in worship, but by in and among the relationships that make up our days. We transform pain by turning from the habits and choices that transmit our pain for others. We transform pain by allowing our pain to be instruct us on the pain of others so that we might participate in their transformation, working to dismantle the systems and practices that keep others in pain, following Jesus Christ, who went first.

Amen.