

Lent 1 (B)
February 28, 2021
Text: Mark 8:31-38

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I imagine you're familiar with the saying, "Ignorance is bliss." And it turns out it's true, at least in part. When we are unaware of judgmental attitudes others might have about us, if we don't know they look down on us, it can save us from experiencing suffering and heartache that would otherwise drag us down. Let me tell you a story about Medinah Slaise, a Black woman who played in the WNBA. When Medinah was growing up, she loved basketball. When her elementary school started a girls' team, she was so excited. Her passion for basketball so completely shaped how she saw things that she was largely oblivious to expressions of racism that were directed at her. For example, when her team traveled to play games in rural, mostly white communities in her home state of Ohio, she noticed people staring at her. They would watch her everywhere she went, and Medinah explained it to herself this way: they were worried about her basketball skills and afraid she would destroy their team. It fed her competitive spirit. It wasn't until much later that she realized something else was going on. It was racism. Those people thought of her as inferior. They looked down on her and dismissed her as a human being. Medinah said that as she got a little older, realizing what had been going on was hard on her. But at that younger age, even though not knowing might have made her more vulnerable in some ways, it also protected her and her love of basketball. She wonders, if she had understood the racist attitudes around her, would it have caused her more suffering? Would it have even led her to give up basketball? (Hidden Brain podcast, "Is It Better to Know?")

It turns out that there are real advantages to not knowing about prejudice, or turning away from looking at unfairness and injustice. Jamie Napier is a psychology researcher who has studied how and why people arrive at their conclusions about discrimination, and how that affects their sense of well-being. She's observed that for many people, it's easier to turn a blind eye to unfairness and injustice. It reduces their feelings of hurt, disappointment and suffering. Professor Napier found that when people put on rose-colored glasses and just deny that prejudice or discrimination or inequality are a problem at all, they report higher levels of personal well-being. On the other hand, people who look more realistically at those things report lower levels of personal well-being. In other words, pretending makes people happier. But pretending is not cost-free. Pretending means that prejudice continues to fester. Pretending means that injustice continues to diminish some people's lives and communities. And the world we all share remains stuck, and sad, and unhealed.

I wonder whether Jesus would look at that “happier” life purchased by pretending injustice doesn’t exist, and judge it to be not worth the cost. I think that’s what he’s getting at in our gospel reading for today. Jesus begins by talking about what is required to be his follower. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Now, everyone listening to Jesus knew what crosses were for. They were instruments of torture and death. It’s not really a terribly appealing invitation. Thank you, Jesus, but really, no thanks.

But Jesus wants us to know where he is leading—not just to the cross, but also to resurrection and new life. Jesus came to bring life and blessing and a new future for this world. Everything we associate with Easter—joy and peace and reconciliation, hope and forgiveness and victory over death—all of that is what Jesus came to accomplish for us and for the whole human family. The thing is, Jesus understood that the only road to Easter led through the cross. The only path to resurrection goes through Jesus’ way of self-giving, sacrificial love. The only life that really matters, the life full of grace that God gives us in Jesus, is a life deeply and passionately connected to others, to neighbors who suffer, to our world.

That’s why Jesus warns that anyone who wants so save their life, to hold onto it like a precious little treasure, will lose that life. In the very act of trying to save it, just for me, it becomes lost. It is exactly when we make our comfort, our convenience and our desires the center of everything we’re about, that we have created a life that is so much less, so tragically much less, than the life God desires for us. When we choose me-me-me, we become shackled to a life that is not truly free, that is dim and constrained and cannot fly. That’s what Jesus is getting at when he asks what profit there is for a person who gains the whole world and loses their soul. The life worth living is the life that is completely caught up with Jesus’ passion and joy—his love of neighbors, his arms open in welcome, his generous spirit. Any other life is really just a waste of your time. Any other life has no long term significance.

So Jesus leads us in a way of costly love, taking up our cross to follow him. For Jesus, the cross was the consequence of his faithfulness to God. Jesus committed his whole life to a way of living with God that was deeply at odds with the values of the world around him. In a world that valued power and punishment, Jesus valued forgiveness and reconciliation and inclusive community. In a world that valued status and wealth, Jesus valued humility and generosity. Over against a culture that prized some and rejected others, Jesus saw every person as a beloved child of God. To a power system that exploited the common people and treated them as disposable, Jesus spoke a prophetic word of judgment and called people to follow his way of compassion. That was the path that led Jesus to the cross.

I wonder, then, what the cross—the consequence of faithfulness to God’s way of compassion—might look like for us. I wonder whether bearing the cross, for us, might mean making every effort to recognize unfairness and injustice, out of love for our neighbors, because we know we have a built-in motivation to turn away, to look past it, to explain it away. I wonder if following Jesus, for us in this time, is refusing to pretend that everything is fair when it comes to race and poverty and homelessness. Jesus’ way of self-giving love includes embracing neighbors who suffer, sharing their pain and standing in solidarity with them. I wonder if setting aside the rose-colored glasses, which carries an emotional cost for our sense of wellbeing—I wonder if that kind of truthfulness is an absolutely essential part of carrying the cross in our time. Only when we’ve seen can we ask, what shall we do?

Dear people of God, I genuinely want you to hear Jesus’ call, as costly as it is, not as a burden but as a gift. It’s the gift of letting go of a life of turning away and turning in on ourselves, because that life is simply not worth it. When we only focus on ourselves and are unable to care about our neighbors or be dedicated to the common good, we’ve put our lives in a small little box, and the only thing left to do is put that box in the ground, six feet under. Jesus invites us to receive the gift of really being alive, the gift of being connected to others, of living freely and fiercely for love! What we are about as followers of Jesus is nothing less than resurrection. God is at work through us to bring healing to this whole beloved creation. The journey to that beautiful Easter life involves a cross, but anything else is just not worth it. Thanks be to God. Amen.