February 28th, 2021 • Second Sunday in Lent • Online Worship

“Opening Our Lives: Losing and Saving”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 8:31-38
Then he 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 him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”
He 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 in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Just eleven days ago we gathered—online of course—for our annual observance of Ash Wednesday to mark the beginning of the Lenten season. This was our first time doing it online. We streamed it first at 10 a.m. and then made it available all throughout the day and evening. You may be interested to know over the course of the day, as many people engaged in that service as we usually have on a Sunday morning—many more than we were drawing to our in-person services in the Chapel in years past.

I don’t know all what that means for us just yet. Maybe more people could participate given the flexible schedule. Or maybe we all felt that we needed it more than ever in this pandemic time. Whatever it was that drew us together that day, we marked the ancient symbol of the cross on our forehead in ash. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Remembering from whence we come, remembering our physicality, our mortality, remembering that this mortal flesh does not endure forever and there will come a time when we will be cradled in the embrace of this earth.

The sign of the cross on our forehead, in ash on Ash Wednesday, is the echo of the sign of the cross on our forehead in water at our baptism. “I mark you this day with the cross,” says the pastor to the one being baptized. “I mark you with the cross as a sign that you are a beloved child of God and a member of Christ’s body, the church.”

From water to ashes. From birth to death. It’s what happens in between that matters: the life we live, the faith we inhabit, the love we give and share. It’s about wearing that cross every day as a disciple of Christ Jesus, accompanying him into the Kingdom of God.

But what does Jesus mean when he poses that heart-awakening challenge in this passage, directing us to deny ourselves and follow him? “Deny ourselves” is pretty harsh, isn’t it? Especially living as we do in a culture that emphasizes self-everything—self-actualization, self-realization, self-improvement, self-development, self-entitlement…

Maybe this contemporary translation of the verse can help us get into the meaning of what Jesus is saying, because I’m convinced that he’s not talking at all about a life of self-deprivation, or self-loathing, or self-diminishment. Hear it this way: “If any one of you wants to follow Me, you will have to give yourself up to God’s plan, take up your cross, and do as I do.” Take up your cross and do as I do.

So what do we know of Jesus that helps us unpack that? What did Jesus do? Jesus lived bringing hope to our communities, peace to people’s hearts, and compassion to those who are suffering. He spoke words of Good News to those who most needed to hear it. He set people free from bonds of brokenness and shame. He painted a picture of a world in which every beloved child of God lives in peace and free from fear of any kind. He made room at the table for all. He reminded people of God’s everlasting covenant with all people and with the creation itself.
Take up your cross and do as I do. While people can't see the cross made on our forehead at our baptism, and when the ashes of Ash Wednesday have been washed away for another year, everyone we meet should see that cross reflected in our daily lives.

Many of you know that the Claremont School of Theology is in the process of affiliating with Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, a pattern that’s fairly prevalent across the world of higher education these days. Willamette is a United Methodist related university, the only one in the West, actually. We’re a good match. One of the many things I’ve enjoyed learning about Willamette is that they love to quote their motto. Students, alums, faculty, administrators, from the President to the newest incoming first year student. Non nobis solum nati sumus. If your Latin’s a little rusty, let me translate: Not unto ourselves alone are we born.

Not unto ourselves alone are we born. First attributed to Cicero, this has been the motto of the school since the early days of its Methodist founders. The catalog states: “Our university motto embodies our values. You may not immediately understand its full meaning when you see it, but, over the course of your time at Willamette, its meaning will continue to grow and become a part of who you are. Our alumni embody the ideas and ideals of these words and hold them close long after graduation.” Non nobis solum nati sumus Not unto ourselves alone are we born.

Of course, Willamette is now non-sectarian, open to people of all religious faith, and none. But that motto speaks not only to the diverse Willamette community. It speaks to all of us who are Christ’s disciples in a specific way as we seek to open our lives to God in this Lenten season. It helps us understand what Jesus means when he asks us this heart-awakening question: “For what will it profit my followers to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” What does mean it to live a life of faith, of compassion, of generosity, of courage—so that others see the cross reflected in us?

When we gather in this sanctuary for worship, we look up to see the stained-glass window of Jesus knocking at the door. And of course it features prominently in our online worship service as well. Commissioned for our sanctuary and made by the Church Glass Company of San Francisco, note that there’s no door knob on the outside of the door. Inspired by a verse in the Book of Revelation: “Behold I stand at the door and knock,” Jesus is knocking—but the door can only be opened from within.

Jesus stands at the door to our hearts, knocking, saying: Open your eyes to my presence. Open your hearts to my love. Open the door. Take up your cross and do as I do.

This Lent, our spiritual work is to open our lives to God. Just outside the door that separates us, that blocks off anything getting in the way of the fullness of life and faith and hope, Jesus waits in a spirit of love and invitation. “If any one of you wants to follow Me, you will have to give yourself up to God’s plan, take up your cross, and do as I do.”

In the words of the old hymn:
“\textit{I can hear my Savior calling, I can hear my Savior calling, I can hear my Savior calling, ‘Take thy cross and follow, follow me...Where he leads me, I will follow, where he leads me, I will follow. Where he leads me, I will follow; I'll go with him, with him, all the way.’}”

Notes:

“\textit{Where He Leads Me}.” UMH #338. Text by E. W. Bandy, 1890.