

October 18, 2009

Scripture: Mark 10: 35-45

Sermon: "Must be your servant"

As I was preparing this sermon, I kept coming back to the question that Jody asked of all us in her sermon last week, "Why are you here?" And as I pondered this question, it evolved into another question, "Why do you proclaim to be a Christian?" And it seemed as if this question followed me wherever I went this week. I would find myself in circumstances that forced me to reflect and to answer the question, "Why do you proclaim to be a Christian?"

Is it for riches? Is it for glory? Is it for what God can do for you? All these interesting situations seemed to scream for an answer to these questions.

This week, I found myself talking with a young man who is a college student and is struggling for meaning: meaning in life, meaning in the career path he will choose, meaning in the faith that he has practiced from the first day his parents brought him to church. He is struggling. He feels a call to ministry but is feeling pressure. His parents want him to avoid ministry because he will never have a "good" paying job and will never be able to live a life of security. So he is looking at the field of science, in hopes that he will find a combination of security and call, but he is struggling. So I found myself in a middle of a conversation with him and the question came up: "Heather, Why do you proclaim to be a Christian?"

This gave me a minute of pause; actually it gave me a lot of minutes of pause. Why do I proclaim to be Christian?

Do I proclaim to be Christian because of its rewards? Am I more privileged than others because I claim to be a Christian? And the answer is no. I am more privileged because I was fortunate to be born in this country, to a family who claims upper-middle class status, who provided me with the opportunities for education. But did I get this reward because I was a Christian? No, because the God that I worship, the God that knows my comings and my goings, that formed my very being, is not a fickle God. My God is not a God who will grant wishes and privileges to a certain few while ignoring others. My God doesn't reward me for faithful service with material items.

So why do I proclaim to be a Christian?

So do I proclaim to be a Christian because of what God will do for me? I know that I can go to God in prayer and lift up my needs. I know that my life is filled with God's grace. I know that I hold onto the hope that God is continuing to work in this world and that one day, there will be no more tears, no more violence, no more war, no more suffering and the lion will lay down with the lamb.

Once again, am I falling into the trap that I only proclaim to be a Christian because of what I get? Grace, Hope, and Love. Sure these are great rewards but there are a lot of people in this world who experience these things. They just don't use the theological terms for these experiences.

So I found myself sitting across from this young man, struggling for an answer. Why do I proclaim to be a Christian? Do I only proclaim to be a Christian because of what it will get me? Why do I proclaim to be a Christian?

And the answer came from our Scripture today from the Gospel of Mark. We proclaim to be Christians because our lives have been changed and have been made whole because God first loved us. God first loved us, unconditionally, completely, and restored our broken souls. We proclaim to be Christians because God first loved us, inspired us, and that gave our lives meaning.

In our Scripture today, Mark is talking to a community that is suffering. They are being persecuted. They are watching their friends die for their beliefs. They have given up everything and they want to know what they get in return for proclaiming to be Christians. They want to know why it is so important for them to proclaim to be Christians.

And our Scripture is Mark's answer. Mark tells of James and John coming up to Jesus and saying, "Look, Jesus, we know you said that you are going to die. We know you said that you are going to be arrested and crucified. But come really. Jesus, you are going into Jerusalem to proclaim your throne. So, when you get there, how about you make us your right and left hand men? We asked first so we think we should get this right first.

And the other disciples hear this conversation and begin to get upset.

And so Jesus once again uses this moment as a teaching moment for the disciples. He asks them if they really know what they are asking. And they respond sure, we can handle it. And Jesus, okay, you will drink from the same cup, and you will be baptized just like me.

And this point, one can almost imagine the disciples' eyes starting to gleam with power and images of rewards. They begin to imagine what their first act of power will be when Jesus steps up to the throne, and kicks the Romans to the curb. They start rubbing their hands with excitement.

And with just one phrase, Jesus shatters their allusions of power and might. "Disciples, you are thinking about how this world works. The leaders of this world hold onto their power. The leaders of this world use their power to separate, oppress, and demean. That's not how God's kingdom works. God's Kingdom is not about the rewards that you will get if you proclaim to be follower of me. God's Kingdom is not about power or might. God's Kingdom is about service and sometime that service to God involves suffering.

You see, the things like grace, peace, mercy, love, and hope, they are not rewards for service. They are side-effects for faithful service.

Jesus stuns the disciples even more by saying that to be truly great in the Kingdom of God; one has to be a servant, even a slave to all.

Well, we all know the rest of the story. And we all know that at that moment, that term “servant” didn’t sit well with the disciples and it didn’t sit well with Mark’s community. And if we are honest with ourselves, it doesn’t sit well with us.

Mark is telling his community and us today that when we proclaim to be Christians, we don’t get any great rewards. There is no power. There is no might. In fact, Mark says, if you proclaim to be a Christian, you can almost guarantee there will be suffering. Just look at Jesus. He came to change the world. He came to show this world that it was wrong. He came to show this world that it is not about power, might and rewards. He came to show this world that is about love, peace, grace, that it is about service, the type of service that will require sacrifice.

Jesus came and shook this world’s foundations to the very core and the leaders of this world didn’t like that. So what did they do? They had Jesus arrested, betrayed, and crucified. Jesus was abandoned by his followers. In the end, Jesus suffered and died on the cross beside two criminals, one on his left and one on his right.

So Mark asks can we as followers expect anything less. This world is going to tell us we are crazy. Because in truth, we claim that a man who was betrayed and died as a criminal is the Son of God. We follow a crucified Christ. And when we wear the crosses around our neck or having them displayed in our sanctuaries, we are really displaying instruments of torture.

So Mark says to his community and to us today, Sure, it doesn’t look to great to proclaim to be a Christian. There are no material rewards. The world is going to think you are all crazy because you follow a crucified Christ. There is going to be suffering. And you are called to be a servant to all.

And we are all thinking: Where do we sign up?

And Mark says, Here’s the good news. That is what the outside world sees. That is what this world sees. It only sees suffering, no rewards, and servanthood. But we know different. We know that we proclaim to be Christians because God first loved us and gave God’s only son for us. We know that we proclaim to be Christians because our lives have been changed and have been made whole because God first loved us. God first loved us, unconditionally, completely, and restored our broken souls.

We proclaim to be Christians because God first loved us, inspired us, and that gave our lives meaning.

We proclaim to be Christians because we know that “Jesus is God’s way of getting what God wants out of us. God wants a world, redeemed, restored to God. And the way God gets that is with ordinary people like us who are willing to walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, and yes, even if needed be to suffer like Jesus.”

Because we know that “human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable...Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle, and the timeless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”

We proclaim to be Christians because God first loved us. God embraced us and made us whole. We proclaim to be Christians because we know something different. This world may only see people gathered together worshipping a crucified Christ, following the teachings of a man who died as a criminal, and lowering ourselves to reach out to the least of these.

But we know differently. We know that when we gather to worship, that we gather in the presence of an amazing God, a God who holds us in the palm of God's hand, who hears our cries, who celebrates our joys, who mourns with us in our grief, and whose light and life gives meaning to our lives. We know that when we follow the teachings of Jesus, that we are following God's will, that God is still working in our world, and that God is not done yet. We know that when we reach out to the least of these, we don't do it out of fear, out of obligation, or even the need to have our names written on book that keeps track of our good deeds. We don't serve out of the hopes of gaining respect of others. We don't serve because we think it will get us farther in our jobs or special positions in our community.

When we serve, we know that we have had an experience with the divine. We know that when we reach out to the least of these, that we are really seeing the image of God in each and every one of our brothers and sisters. When we serve, we experience a different kind of power, the power of compassion, the power of love, the power of hope.

So why do we proclaim to be a Christian? We proclaim to follow the Son of the Living God because our lives have been given meaning through the gift of God's love and we know what it means to truly be a person of service.

May we always gladly proclaim that we follow a crucified Christ who changed the world through love, hope, and service. Amen.

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