September 13, 2015

Mark 8:27-38

On the Mend: Healing What Ails Us – Healing Fear

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Mark 8:27-38 New Revised Standard Version

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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.”

Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Peter is saying to Jesus, you are strong, you heal our illnesses, you guarantee our security, you make sure that we are victorious, and happy and healthy and wise.[[1]](#footnote-2) But, Jesus wants Peter to know how he understands the word Messiah. It is not the same way that Peter does. Jesus points to a God who meets us in vulnerability, suffering, and loss.[[2]](#footnote-3) Jesus and Peter have a difference of understanding.

Jesus points to a God who meets us in those moments when we really need God, when all we have worked for and hoped for falls apart and we realize that we are incapable of saving ourselves and desperately in need of a God who meets us where we are. God shows up in Jesus where we least expect God to be. And in Jesus we don’t get the God we want, but we get the God we need.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Jesus begins to speak about his death to the disciples and it stirs up such fear in Peter that Peter chews Jesus out! Jesus returns the favor and tries to give his followers another perspective. Jesus says that those who wish to follow him must deny themselves and take up their cross. And we might think of Weight Watchers, you know, have a little less of the things you like, don’t overindulge in the things that make you happy, cut enjoyment calories whenever possible because they’re not Christian.[[4]](#footnote-5)

But, maybe Jesus is saying that the life that has been packaged and sold to us isn’t real life and we need to die to those illusions to be born into the abundant life God wants for us.[[5]](#footnote-6) We might think that life is something you go out and get, or earn, or buy, or win. But it turns out that life is like love, it can’t be won or earned or bought, only given away. And the more you give it away, the more you have. Sure, it is risky to live the Gospel-way, but what is the risk of not doing this? It is death of another kind, it is living in fear. How do we heal our fear of losing the things of this world so that we can truly live?[[6]](#footnote-7) Taking up the cross and following Jesus is not a thing of fear, but one of love.

Thursday was World Suicide Prevention Day and I kept thinking about my stepbrother Max. 16 years ago this week my stepbrother Max committed suicide. It was 1999 and I was in my second year at seminary studying to be a preacher. My mom asked me to speak at the reception because another preacher was going to talk at the funeral home. I had no idea what to say. I knew we were all devastated. We could see hope for Max’s future, but he could not. And we all wondered if we could have done something to prevent his death. I knew that we needed God’s healing. We needed the reassurance of God’s grace and love. I knew that Max’s pain had now ended and he had been filled with the light of God’s love. God had embraced Max’s spirit and God had wiped away every tear from his eyes.

But I was speaking at the reception, and as I listened to the other preacher speak at the funeral I kept getting angrier and angrier. He and I had a different understanding. He talked about how suicide was the unforgiveable sin and how God was very far from Max. I saw God’s claim on Max, but the other preacher did not.

And on Friday we remembered the horrific events of 9/11 and one tragic aspect of our post 9/11 legacy is fear. In Chicago just a few days before the anniversary of 9/11, a Sikh man was called a terrorist, told to go back to his country and beaten up.[[7]](#footnote-8) We fear people who are different.

And Jesus tells us that only when you love others do you most understand what love really is. Only when you give away your life for the sake of others do you discover it. When we focus our energy on fulfilling the needs of others, our own deepest needs are met.[[8]](#footnote-9) When I think about the first responders on 9/11 who gave up their lives for those who were different then them, I see people who said no to fear. I see people who said yes to love and yes to grace.

Jesus wants us to know that the only things we can hold onto are the things we give away, like love and mercy and kindness and compassion.[[9]](#footnote-10) What gives you the greatest joy in life? What creates for you the deepest sense of purpose? When do you feel most alive, most true to the person you believe God created you to be?[[10]](#footnote-11) My guess is that it wasn’t something you bought, or even earned, but rather it was rooted in relationship, in acts of service, and in acts of caring for another.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Jesus wants us to know that self-denial and cross-bearing are not about being less happy, it is not about Weight Watchers, but it is about discovering the real and abundant life. A kind of life that comes through sacrificial love in service to another.[[12]](#footnote-13)

There is a movie from about 10 years ago with Samuel L Jackson of *Snakes on a Plane* fame called *Coach Carter*. That movie is based on a true story of Ken Carter who returns to his old high school in California in 1999 to get the basketball team into shape. He has tough rules about academic discipline, and he succeeds in setting the players on a winning streak on the basketball court. But the players’ grades start to suffer and Coach Carter locks the players out of the gym and shuts down their championship season. The players and parents complain, but Coach Carter is determined his players are going to do well in class. Every one of his players graduated from high school, by the way.

There’s a wonderful scene in the movie *Coach Carter* when a student stands up and repeats something that Coach Carter has taught them, a quote from Marianne Williamson’s book *Return to Love*: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us … We were all meant to shine as children. It is not just in some of us, it is in everyone. As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

Jesus wants us to change our understanding. Jesus wants us to face each day with abundant love, not fear. This kind of change is not easy but it is what Jesus asks of us. May we name and release the fears that keep us from following in the way of Jesus today. Amen.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Weight Watchers illustration comes from http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. From Marcia McFee, worship series On the Mend. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/09/10/terrorist-go-back-to-your-country-attacker-yelled-in-alleged-assault-of-sikh-man/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Thanks to Marcia McFee for the connection with Coach Carter in her On the Mend series. http://youtu.be/Ybt8wXIahQU [↑](#footnote-ref-14)