

MARK 8:31-38

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:23-31

Romans 4:13-25

When the Road Forks

David spoke two weeks ago about the Transfiguration of Jesus and that scripture began: Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.

This scripture is the event that marked 'six days before'. Jesus talks about how his ministry will play out for the first time and Peter reacts. This is what leads to 'transformation'. It's helpful to understand where this is coming from, so we back up a bit more ... to verse 27 where Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter responds, "You are the Messiah".

Jesus ministry is in full swing and he identified many concepts of God's Kingdom: there is enough for everyone (fed the four thousand); the important vision is spiritual vision (rebuked the pharisees); cautioned us about the problems of doubt; explained the necessity to express the truth always; and finally Jesus talks 'Messiah'. Jesus is pretty clear what the Kingdom is going to look like if he is the Messiah. But Peter is expecting a different Messiah ... indeed all of Israel is expecting a different Messiah. The Messiah they are looking for is a great warrior, waving a sword and beating back the Romans so that the people are free of oppression. And Jesus knows this is what a lot of people want. Jesus knows that a lot of people will take up arms against the Romans and Jesus can pretty much figure out that a lot of people will die. We know this to be true then and now. War kills people and leaves the world in a hopeless circle of revenge.

Jesus has exemplified God's path to peace and Peter, thinking only of what he knows as the way to release oppression, is horrified that his Messiah would not only die, but die such a shameful death. But Jesus is clear "GET THEE BEHIND ME SATAN ... for you have in mind not the things of God, but the things of man." Humanity's way to peace is not the way to God's peace.

Jesus goes on to explain how to participate in God's Kingdom; "Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take his cross and follow me."

So, as I read this wonderful text, I thought, 'haven't I just talked about this?' So I looked up my sermon and sure enough, last September, we talked about Jesus' instruction, "Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take his cross and follow me."

We talked about an alternate interpretation of 'take up' that could also mean, instead of 'pick up', but could mean 'take away' or 'remove'. And we talked about what the use of that term 'cross' meant. The cross was a deep-seated symbol of fear terrorizing the Judeans, and that we need to 'remove' our fear in order to follow Christ.

Well, I thought, I can't just say that again! So, recognizing the wisdom of our Gospel writers, I compared the two texts from Matthew and Mark to see how these story tellers might have differed. After all, we need to remember that they spoke to different audiences. Audiences over time were a combination of Judeans that believed in Jesus as Christ, Judeans that did not, Greeks ... called pagan and Romans. And as the word of God proceeds through millennia, to us today, we have different perspectives, that resonate with different analogies.

When I compared the scriptures, it turned out that outside of a few variations to the size of groups and how much Peter 'exclaimed' his distress, these two accounts are pretty similar ... until you get to the last few lines of Mark when this author, alone, recounts that Jesus speaks of SHAME.

"For whoever will be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the son of Man also will be ashamed of him..."

Shame... shame in Jesus' world ... we know a little bit about the 'shame' and its opposite 'honour' and its status as currency of the first century. Honour was real, traded, fought for and in limited supply. The lack of HONOUR was shame. Death on the cross, for many reasons, bore negative honour, lots of shame. The cross was a death for thieves and bandits; the Romans murdered thousands of dissenters on the cross ... a public, terrifying, and shameful death. The Romans knew that recovering from that shame would not be easy, or perhaps even possible, for the entire clan of the murdered person. The Romans foresaw a much quieter, shamed, oppressed people to deal with, as a result of the Roman strategy of the shame of death on the cross.

Shame is not new ... as a matter of fact, the first we hear of shame is in the Garden of Eden story. The first thing Adam and Eve did when booted from the Garden of Eden, was to be ashamed of their nakedness and cover up. Shame is that feeling when we are separated from God and, in a like fashion, shame separates us from God. Shame is that loud voice that says 'what God made is not good enough'.

Jesus knew what he was asking of his followers. It's not like the shame of the cross was a little thing for Jesus. Jesus and the disciples were well aware of the stigma of shame of the cross as a source of that shame. It's not like it suddenly didn't matter. It was a really big deal! It didn't suddenly become a little deal. Jesus knew he was asking his disciples to take a very, very difficult path. However, Jesus also knew how destructive shame is. Shame leads into a circle of strife and revenge and war. These reactions to shame are destructive to our relationship with God. Shame separates us from God.

What I want to explore today is that option to choose the path of Jesus. But what is that path? Yes, the path is identified with the cross. Yes the cross exemplifies shame. But the way of Jesus, the way toward God, is to repent and walk away from the burden and destruction of shame. How can we help our world recover from shame? How can we help those who are afflicted with the shame oppressing and isolating them? AND, how can we recover from the shame inflicted on us?

There are hundreds of shades of shame ... it's just that ingrained in our world. Recovering from shame ... we're going to take a look at only two of the multifaceted complexity of shame ... 1. How can we help someone to recover who is afflicted with shame? And 2. how can we recover when we are shamed?

Paula told us last week that the people coming to the river to be baptized, to receive life anew, were people who had been shamed. People cast out by their culture; those people who were not acceptable by the standards of their day. People made separate. These people were made to feel separate, shamed by others those who had power over them. We often suggest that 'separate' in the first century communal culture was a more painful condition than 'separate' in our North American 'individualized' culture. But I'm pretty sure that the shame of 'shunned' today is painful for those who wander the streets alone, or that sleep in a doorway, alone, or that suffer the stares at their hijab or their turban, or that can't get into a building because their legs can't carry them up the stairs.

The bible tells us that acceptance is the solution to this terrible feeling of shame. Paula told us that John the Baptist “seems to be saying to the powerless ones who come to him that they can choose a new life. It’s as if he says, “Come. Enter the river and be changed”. No longer confused just because somebody else pushed their power over you and convinced you that you are not good enough. Repent ... see a new way ... see a way of acceptance instead of the shame of revulsion. We can offer that hand of acceptance and let people know that as God loves them, we will try to love them, too. They are not a sinner, but loved just as they are by the God of Creation.

2. How can we recover when we are shamed by someone?

So often, people are trying to make us ‘better’ with their ‘you’re not good enough’ advice. But it gets wearing, doesn’t it? It get us down on ourselves, doesn’t it? It makes me feel that I just don’t know how to be a person, let alone a ‘right person’, or a ‘good person’. People want us to feel differently than we feel ... “You shouldn’t feel that way”. People want us to behave differently than we behave, “Shhhhhh”. Have you ever been shushed? I get that one a lot. What about that garlic you had for supper? “Your breath smells”, or what if you weigh more than someone feels is good .. “maybe you’ll love that weight one day”; what about the shame of a woman with a baby and no husband? (this is different today, thank God, but there are many of us here who know just how terrifying that was). Or, God forbid, what about the shame of loving a person of the same gender? Or thinking that you look fine in a frilly dress, when some others think you should just wear pants and feel the need to tell you how wrong you are?

But here’s the thing to understand about shaming. The person that has this ‘advice’ for you is in some kind of pain. A pain, that, is overflowing and perhaps looking for a cause. Maybe our behaviour actually is the cause of their pain, or maybe they are just in the kind of pain that people get into when they are sad, or depressed, or angry, or frustrated. Here’s the insight for us, the shamed. Because we are human, we don’t want to be alone in our pain, so, we go looking for a partner.

Where is our choice in this? A poet I read while exploring ‘shame’ said, “Give me love to forgive the one who’s caused me pain whose pain was too great to bear alone.” Then, wait for someone to put that shame on US because we are too loud, or too smelly, or too ‘foreign’ and forgive them because their pain is simply overflowing, needing the company of our pain. So THIS is where we get ‘misery loves company’.

Jesus said, on that cross of shame, “Forgive them for they know not what they do”.

There’s a fork in the road ...

That’s our choice ... the path we can choose. We can be angry and resentful, thinking of revenge, maybe even war ... which I have done plenty of. Or we can choose Jesus’ way of understanding and forgiveness.

Unless we choose forgiveness, we will be separated from God. That’s how shame separates us from God ... with our resentment, with the second guessing that God’s creation is bad, or wrong.

These are the times in our lives when our faith struggles and on the day in this scripture, Peter’s faith was shaken .. he was in pain so he spills his pain all over Jesus and rebukes Peter right back. He called his friend SATAN... Satan is in HEBREW *is* liar *in* wait; *an* adversary; *an* enemy; *hater*; accuser; *opposer*; *contradictor*. Peter shook Jesus and Jesus, in front of his disciples, shamed Peter.

Peter in pain ... Jesus in doubt and pain ... Jesus wants company in his pain and lets it fly.

“Give me love to forgive the one who's caused me pain whose pain was too great to bear alone.”

Our Psalm reading today extolls the wonders of God and God's power, but it didn't start that way. Psalm 22 starts with overwhelming pain, “God why have you forsaken me?” The psalmist goes from pain pain pain to “Lord you are not far from me” to “I'm just gonna tell the whole world how wonderful you are, God of love.” Is that what 'repent' looks like? Can we actually decide to go from pain to love of God? Well, the Psalmist tells us we can.

When there's a fork in the road, pick up faith and follow the path to forgiveness.

This Lenten journey ... the path to the cross Our theme ... The Path Through Lent ... it's a process. A process from pain to that which is at the cross ... more pain, shame ... and then, forgiveness. The cross is forgiveness and forgiveness puts us back in line with God. No longer distracted by whatever pain we have been given or taken on or or or or .. Forgiveness is the path back to love.

Wherever it comes from, the pain of shame is washed it away or forgiven away. The poet Rumi says that the big question for us humans isn't “What should I do” or “What is expected of us” but “what do we love?” What do we yearn for? Do we yearn for revenge when someone has shamed us? or do we yearn for love, no matter how much we are hurt?

Paula in starting our Lenten season last week, suggested Lent is a time of letting go ... so let's let go of shame, living in it, giving it.

So, after this story that is faith-shaken, shame-tossed, the cross is offered to transform our lives, Jesus takes us up the mountain and shines. Jesus shines to show us the path lit by his glowing light, especially when there's a fork in the road. AMEN