

Something to Die For

Mark 8:27-9:1

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First Central Congregational UCC

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This being the First Sunday in Lent, we have begun a new worship series—"Practicing Passion." But there is continuity with our worship since Advent, in that we are continuing in the Gospel of Mark. With today's story, we arrive at a new section in Mark's gospel. We have ended the "way through the wilderness" and now begin "the way to Jerusalem" and the cross. Here is how scholar Ched Myers introduces today's reading:

We have arrived at the midpoint of the story. Once again, Mark's Jesus turns to challenge the disciples/reader. "Who do you say that I am?" This question is the fulcrum upon which the gospel narrative balances. Not only that: upon our answer hangs the character of Christianity in the world. Do we know who it is we are following, and what he is about?

Hear now the words of the Gospel:

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 [*or this title is better understood as the Truly Human One or the New Human Being, as I have often described it in this series of sermons*] (The New Human Being) 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.” And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

This year Ash Wednesday fell on St. Valentine’s Day. Months ago as the staff gathered to brainstorm worship themes for this season, we quickly settled upon “Passion” in order to take advantage of the strange alignment on the calendar. As we talked further, I went to my shelves and grabbed a book entitled *Practicing Passion*, which gave us our theme for the season.

The full title of the book is *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*. It is a youth ministry book, written by Kenda Creasy Dean, who has become one of the current experts on youth ministry. I read the book when I was a youth minister, and it helped to shape my approach to ministry. But the points made in the book can be more broadly applied to the entire church, not just one division of our ministry.

She begins with the acknowledgment that adolescents are passionate beings. They feel their emotions intensely. They long for love. They desire fidelity, ecstasy, and intimacy. Often their search for their desires is adventurous and reckless and all-consuming.

But don’t many of us adults “spend our lives looking for ways to rekindle the passion of youth,” she writes. “The burning desire to be engulfed by love, to be ignited by a purpose, to radiate light because the love of another shines within us.”

The psychologist Erik Erikson wrote that adolescents are searching for something or someone “to die for.” Dean explains that this is “a cause worthy of their suffering, a love worthy of a life-time.”

And so she is critical of youth ministry that fails to present a passionate faith and a passionate church worthy of the passions of teenagers.

But she’s also critical of a church that doesn’t provide that for everyone. She writes, “Do we practice passion, transformed by a Love who never disappoints, and live by a faith so convincing that we stake our lives on it?”

Look up the definition of “passion” in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary and you find five major definitions, some with subordinate meanings.

The first definition is “the sufferings of Christ between the night of the Last Supper and his death.” The second definition of passion is “suffering,” which the dictionary explains is now obsolete. The third is “the state or capacity of being acted on by external agents or forces.”

With the fourth we arrive at emotion, which has some subordinate definitions: “the emotions as distinguished from reason,” “intense, driving, or overmastering feeling or conviction,” and “an outbreak of anger.”

Finally, the fifth definition arrives at what might be our more common contemporary usage, “ardent affection : love.” With the subordinate definitions of “a strong liking or desire for or devotion to some activity, object, or concept,” “sexual desire,” and “an object of desire or deep interest.”

Of course, when we pick these worship themes, we often choose a word that has multiple, sometimes even ambiguous, meanings. This allows us to play with those various meanings in our worship.

To practice passion might mean to practice an ardent affection or strong desire for some activity of deep interest. It can also mean our desire for our beloved. It can also mean to participate in the suffering and death of Christ. Which is clearly the meaning of today’s story in the Gospel of Mark.

We long for something worthy of our commitment, and Jesus offers us a mission that, while costly, will save.

Jesus rebukes Peter for Peter has misunderstood who Jesus is and what he is doing. He isn’t the Messiah, as that figure had been anticipated—a military leader who will reestablish the Davidic state. No, Jesus is the Son of Man, the Truly Human One, the New Human Being, prophesied by Daniel, who will experience great suffering as he challenges the status quo and creates a new social order. When Peter still doesn’t get it, Jesus calls him Satan.

Remember back a few weeks to some of my earlier sermons on Mark. In the parable of the sower, Jesus talks about how the sower will plant the seed but that Satan will come and uproot it. Peter is pulling up the seeds of the new order which Jesus is sowing. Peter is trying to turn the Jesus movement into something other than what Jesus intends for it to be. And in doing so he has become like those opponents of Jesus who accused Jesus of being in league with Satan and whom Jesus turned the tables on saying they were actually in league with the forces of evil because they were working to oppose what God was doing in the world. Peter, part of the inner circle, is now arrayed with Jesus’ opponents.

The disciples still aren’t understanding Jesus after all this time, so he takes a moment to carefully explain to them and to the larger crowds what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We are to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow.

Now, to take up your cross would have been unambiguous to those who first heard it. The only people crucified were those viewed by the Romans as a political threat. Jesus is saying that his genuine followers are those willing to die at the hands of the state as they confront the state for its injustice.

If you aren’t willing to risk your life, then your life won’t be saved. Those unwilling to risk their lives fear death. The fear of death is used to control us and limit our freedom. The person afraid to die is a person who has already lost their life.

But those who risk their lives are those who have overcome the fear of death. They are truly free. They truly live.

Once again this week, we were reminded that every day we face life and death questions. Adolescents who lack a sense of meaning and purpose, whose lives are devoid of passion, can find that purpose in a distorted reality that endangers the lives of other people.

But at the same time, we witness the courage of teachers and students. Katie Miller told me of one friend of hers, a teacher, who said she understands that every single day when she goes to work, she is making the choice to risk her life on behalf of her students.

The only things worthy of our love and devotion are those things we are willing to risk everything for. Only the costly commitments provide true enjoyment and meaning.

Lest we be confused about who Jesus is and what he is doing, the Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus call us to a costly discipleship—something to die for.