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Jeremiah 15:15-21

Mark 8:31-38

VIA DOLOROSA: SUFFERING ON THE HORIZON?

The Via Dolorosa is a street in the old city of Jerusalem believed to be the path that Jesus walked on the way to his crucifixion. The Latin words can be translated as the Way of Suffering. I am using that as a title to a sermon series during this season of Lent as we see what we can learn as we seek to walk with Jesus through the Gospel of Mark's account, moving toward the cross, that we might grow in our understanding of what it means that our Lord suffered and died and what that means for us as those who try to follow him. Today we heard an expression from the prophet Jeremiah that sounds like he thought that he should not have to suffer since he had been faithful in following what God wanted him to do. There are prosperity gospel preachers who follow that line, who tell people not only that they won't have to suffer if they are faithful, but that they will remain healthy and will grow wealthy if they follow the directives of scripture. But then we have Jesus' experience, who was in no way wealthy and had his life cut short precisely because he was seeking to follow God's way. And we hear him say that those who want to follow him will have deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. What are we as Christians to make of these divergent understandings of suffering?

This account from Mark causes me to feel sorry for Peter who is wanting to do the right thing, but always somehow comes up short. When Jesus predicted what the future held for himself, that he was about to go through a time of suffering and would be killed, Peter said there had to be another option. This particular disciple was not timid. The gospel accounts says, "Peter took (Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him." It doesn't give us his precise words, but this was the message: "You may be dedicated to going on such a path, Jesus, but let me redirect you." There may have been an expletive in there somewhere. But before Peter got finished, Jesus rebuked him in return. "You get behind me." That's where followers are supposed to be. Then he called him, 'Satan.' Perhaps Jesus

found Peter's objections tempting. In Gethsemane, Jesus would later pray to be delivered from the suffering toward which he was heading – we'll hear more about that next week.

When Jesus would eventually pick up his cross, it would be to set himself against the Roman Empire and the temple authorities, against the ideology of the world that oppressed and shackled God's people, and against everything that hindered the in-breaking of God's reign. It was much more than just offering one's thoughts and prayers over a serious matter. He put his very life on the line in peaceful resistance as he picked up the cross to literally go to his death. In the gospel writer's day, the threat of crucifixion was still there. As this gospel account was being written some forty years after Jesus' death, social, political and religious instability were inescapable. A series of Roman emperors were asserting their deadly power. The temple in Jerusalem was under siege and would soon be destroyed, while Jews were divided over supporting Rome or rising up against it. The fledgling band of Jesus' followers were caught in the middle. Their beliefs did not lead them to fight Rome militarily, but they wouldn't bow down to Caesar. Families were divided. It was a difficult, desperate, and dangerous time. This line from Mark's Gospel about cross-bearing reminded Christ's early followers of the cross' very literal potential to take life. Depending on the choices they made, indeed, it might take theirs.

But not only is there the language about taking up one's cross – those who would follow Jesus are first told to deny themselves. That needs some unpacking. For those in our day who have been denigrated through harassment or racism or homophobia, who struggle to feel worthy of love and appreciation, it can be harsh to hear Jesus say, "Deny yourself." It's particularly true for those who have only recently discovered that they have a self.

We need to hear these words within the entire context of Mark's Gospel. According to Mark, Jesus is the pre-eminent servant of God who comes confronting every force that disturbs and destroys human life. Throughout this account, he is sent by God to restore dignity to all who have had it taken away. Picture the leper who was segregated from the community by his disease. Jesus restores him to health and community. Notice the woman who lives on the fringe

of town suffering from a hemorrhage - Jesus heals her and gives her a name. Look at the sinner who cannot undo the effects of his misdeeds - Jesus cancels all his debts with God. Mark tells us how Jesus comes to give worth and value, not to take it away.

Jesus says, deny yourself, carry a cross, and follow me. But perhaps in our world, we need to change the order of the imperatives. Which comes first? Which is most important to God? We can deny ourselves, but we run the risk of ignoring our or others' God-given dignity. We can go out looking for crosses to carry, and I expect that you know of people who get some odd kind of pleasure who want to play the martyr, and actually seek out suffering in some way. Yet, Jesus never says, "Go out into the world in order to get yourself beaten up!" We are called upon to follow him, however. This invitation comes before every other claim on our lives.

Following Jesus means we become his disciples, which means we put ourselves in the position to learn from him. We give up the illusion that we are experts in leading our own lives. We revise our personal agendas and we take direction from Jesus. And following Jesus means we will engage in the same work that he did, which is to say we will speak out against every mean spirit, we will feed the hungry and seek healing for the sick, we will speak the truth, we will touch the untouchable, forgive the unforgivable, and love the unlovable. We will seek to do God's work in the world, just like Jesus did. When we do that, it will be a challenge to some of the powers that be, and we have reason to expect some of the expressions of rejection that Jesus faced.

As one New Testament scholar reminds us, the members of Mark's community were not called to suffer. They were called to proclaim the gospel. As a result of the confrontational nature of that calling, the world they would confront would persecute them in order to stop them. Suffering is the result of the call, not the call itself. What happened to Jesus, for the same reason it happened to him, will happen to those acting in his name.

Friends, we don't wake up every morning and say, "How am I going to let the world beat me up today?" But we are called upon to get out of bed to ask, "How can I let the whole world know the life of Jesus is the hope of the world?"

Jesus says, "Come, follow me." That does not mean we will intentionally put ourselves in positions where we will be put down, beaten up, or killed. But it does mean we will take God more seriously than we take ourselves. Then if the world hands us a cross, we shouldn't expect anything different.

"Follow me. Pick up your cross. Deny yourself." This is Christ's invitation. It never means that we give up our dignity, but it does mean that we will put on the mantle of faithfulness. We will speak the same kind of active love that Jesus speaks. We will act as Jesus came to act. We will put our very lives on the line. And then if a cross is given to us, we will not carry it alone - for Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.