



First United Church of Oak Park

It Is What It Is

Mark 8:27-38

The Rev. Lydia Mulkey

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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.”

“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Thomas Jefferson offers these to our country as high ideals. I can’t help but notice that in this scripture Jesus offers as high ideals of Christianity losing your life, denying yourself, and the pursuit of God’s realm no matter the cost.

On first read, I think this scripture is incredibly confusing and even potentially harmful if not given time for study. In my work on preventing domestic and sexual violence in faith communities, it’s one of the scriptures we point out as a potential roadblock, because all too often victims of abuse hear the message that abuse is “their cross to bear.” That is certainly as far from the intended message as you can get. But the intended message seems cloaked in mystery here. Take up your cross? What does that even mean?

It’s not much of a sales pitch for becoming a follower of Jesus, that’s for sure. No wonder Peter pulled Jesus aside. The scriptures don’t tell us what Peter said, just that he rebuked Jesus. I imagine it was something like, “Lay off the death and suffering stuff, you’re going to scare people away!” Maybe Peter had spoken to a church growth specialist and was sharing his findings about how to create a feel good vibe that kept people coming back. Jesus’ response? “Get behind me Satan.” This response seems like a throwback to Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness being tempted. So the question is, what temptation did Jesus hear in Peter’s rebuke?

I recently read a book called *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can’t Stand Positive Thinking*. Which, by the way, would also make a great title for my memoir. In it, Oliver Burkman discusses his research on Stoic philosophers and followers, mindfulness experts, and others who embrace something quite the opposite of positive thinking.

Burkman notes this powerful observation about his research, “...it pointed to an alternative approach, a ‘negative path’ to happiness, that entailed taking a radically different stance towards those things that most of

us spend our lives trying to avoid. It involved learning to enjoy uncertainty, embracing insecurity, stopping trying to think positively, becoming familiar with failure, even learning to value death. In short, all these people seemed to agree that in order to be truly happy, we might actually need to be willing to experience more negative emotions—or, at the very least to learn to stop running quite so hard from them.”

The cult of positive thinking, of the pursuit of happiness, is exactly what keeps me miserable sometimes. The temptation to be anywhere but here, with any circumstances but these, to feel anything but this.

For the last two months or so, I have been committed to meditating at least once a day. It is a practice of being mindfully present. It is not an escape from my pain or my negative emotions. It's a willingness to just let them exist and stop fighting them. I've meditated before. I even took a class on meditation in seminary. But here's what I've come to know in a much deeper way from committing to it over a longer period of time: reality is not the worst thing that can happen to me. Fighting reality is. I'm learning to notice my suffering. I'll say to myself, "Oh there's anxiety." "Oh, there's back pain." "Oh, there's anger." I notice it. I'm learning that I can let it exist without jumping in the car with it and letting it get in the driver's seat and fly recklessly down Lakeshore at 80 miles an hour.

Anxiety, pain, and anger are terrible chauffeurs. They never take me anywhere fun. They are, however, going to show up. It's my job to thank them for stopping by with whatever information they've brought, and then continue on about my own business. If I pretend they aren't there, I find that they inevitably start honking the horn. If I try to stop them or yell at them to go away, they often take the opportunity to whisk me away without my consent. It's better to let them know you see them, but that you won't be joining them for a ride today.

I think in the language of faith, I'd call this surrender. It's an unpopular word these days. No one sings "I Surrender All" much anymore in churches like ours. But surrendering to the existence of so-called negative emotions and circumstances can be powerful. When the gospel calls you to do justice and it's going to cost you, it requires surrender to a good that is greater than your own comfort and "happiness." You lay down your own desires for the sake of another, and the strange thing is that in letting go of what you thought you wanted, you gain your very soul.

But Peter didn't want to do that. Instead, Peter tempted Jesus with the battle cry "never surrender!" "We can have it all!" I bet Peter asks, "What's with all the negativity, Jesus? Think positive, you don't have to suffer and die! We'll just go easy on the eating with sinners and touching lepers thing for a while and things will calm down. Everything will be fine!" Peter wants that pain free and happy life.

This is the promise of the prosperity gospel proclaimed by the television preachers some are home watching right now: that God wants you to be tall, handsome, and rich; that God wants you to have an easy life. Sorry friends, but that's the opposite of what Jesus revealed to us about God. God has a plan for all of humanity to love and be loved, and that doesn't come about by making God's people really good at denying the reality of ours and our neighbor's suffering. Quite the opposite, actually.

Kate Bowler studied the Prosperity Gospel and then was diagnosed with terminal cancer. It's a strange turn of events for someone studying a religious group that says you're supposed to be happy all the time. A group that says you're supposed to fight against your sickness, your anxiety, even your own death. That you're supposed to will it away with positive thinking in the name of Jesus. It's the opposite of surrender really.

In her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, Bowler says, "For Christians not of the prosperity persuasion, surrender is a virtue; the writings of the saints are full of commands to 'let go' and to submit yourself to what seems to be the will of the Almighty. All of American culture and pop psychology scream against that. Never give up on your dreams! Just keep knocking, that door is about to open! Think positively! Self-improvement guaranteed!!"

In trying to do the work of the gospel, so often we do try to have it all and surrender nothing. Can we feed the hungry without having to get too close to their suffering? Can we help the poor but continue in our own overconsumption? Can we fight for justice, but not offend anyone? Can we follow Jesus, but really just prop up our institutions and pursue our own happiness while calling it Christianity? If you're feeling convicted, don't worry, so am I.

Following Jesus, and just being alive, is a different kind of having it all. It's wild mix of suffering and celebration, of defeat and triumph, of life and death. Sometimes it's crosses, and sometimes it's empty graves. The good news is this... either way, God is there.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Pursuit... it's like grasping for something with clenched fists. Losing your life for the sake of the gospel? That's finding that God-love-happiness was never a thing to be pursued... it was a reality that always superseded your circumstances if only you'd just surrender. Feelings and circumstances change... God's loving presence is eternal.

Kate Bowler's circumstance is terminal cancer. Lots of people wanted to tell her to never surrender, to think positive, to settle for nothing less than having it all. But what she found was that she didn't have any power over her prognosis, but she knows God is there even in the worst of circumstances. That means it's ok to know we are limited, that we will suffer, that negative emotions will come, because the greater reality is God's presence. She asks, "What would it mean for Christians to give up that little piece of the American Dream that says, 'You are limitless'? Everything is not possible. The mighty kingdom of God is not yet here. ...What if being the people of 'the gospel' meant that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough."

And it is.

Amen