

Plain Talk about Pain and Suffering

A sermon based on Mark 8:31-38

Don Friesen
Ottawa Mennonite Church
March 19, 2000

It may very well be an apocryphal story, but I like to think it's true, and the story is this: About the time that Regis Philbin pitched his latest show to the ABC network, Kathie Lee Gifford, his co-host on another show, was pitching a similar show to the network. Whereas Regis' show was designed to pander to the crass underbelly of the viewing public, Kathie Lee, being a devout Christian, decided to appeal to nobler hopes. Like Regis' show, Kathie Lee's show would also feature questions, increasing in complexity as the stakes got higher. Even the names of the two shows were similar, only, instead of calling it "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" Kathie Lee called her show, "Who Wants to be a Martyr?"

The higher-ups at ABC were not ecstatic about the show. Their hesitation sprung, in part, from Kathie Lee's proposed questions for the show. They were hard questions; she refused to start with questions like "What is the first letter of the alphabet?" or "What colour is a stop sign?" ABC also had serious questions about its ability to attract sponsors for the show; apparently even the Christian Church was hesitant to back it. Plans for a related show, "Who wants to marry a Martyr?" were also shelved. Meanwhile, I hear—and this too may be an apocryphal story—I hear that one of the rival networks has its eye on a pilot show called "Greed," which offers twice as much money as Regis's show, features up to five players at a time, and gives players opportunities to take each other's share of the money.

A Loaded Question

If these game shows serve any purpose at all, they indicate that a lot can ride on one question, or rather, on one's answer to the question. The same is true of some biblical questions. In the passage just prior to our Gospel reading Jesus asks his disciples two questions, the first question being, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27) A fairly easy question, and the disciples didn't even have to call anyone to help them answer it. Having picked up the scuttlebutt in the villages, they quickly offer the answers: some say "John the Baptist," others say, "Elijah," and still others, "one of the prophets". (8:28)

Correct answer! And answers that were not surprising, given that to this point everything was going great! Jesus was feeding four and five thousand people at a crack, and doing it with just a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. People were being healed, demons were being cast out, and Jesus' reputation was spreading, far and wide. John the Baptist had made a big splash on the national scene, and so when Jesus came along with a similar message of renewal, well, it was understandable that he be taken for John! Some thought he was Elijah, who was expected to return. Some saw him more like Jeremiah, focussing on the authenticity and depth of one's spiritual quest. And, well, he also reminded others of other prophets. Given his emphasis upon the faithfulness of God, he sounded a little like Hosea. Given his darker, apocalyptic sayings, he sounded like Daniel. Or maybe Micah, given his call to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk

humbly with God; or even an Amos, given his denunciation of the rich and greedy, and his compassion for the poor!

The disciples answered Jesus' first question correctly, but it led to a second question, a more personal question, "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29) An intellectually intriguing question becomes poignantly personal, and scholars agree that this question, the second question, is the key passage in Mark's Gospel. Mark has been preparing us for this quintessential Christian question from the very first verse.

This time the disciples hesitated. A lot was riding on the question, and they didn't want to get it wrong. Finally Simon Peter offered an answer: "You are the Messiah." (Mark 8:29) Bingo! Although Jesus doesn't say as much, we assume it was the right answer, for he goes on to elaborate on its meaning. Mark tells us that "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...." (8:31)

Peter should have quit while he was ahead, but he didn't care for Jesus' response to his answer, and he told Jesus so. "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him," Mark tells us. (Mark 8:32) Whereupon Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (8:33)

Peter thought he had won the jackpot, but it appears that his simple answer was loaded with assumptions that Jesus did not share. Jesus' messianic vision was not the popular one. Had there been game shows in first century Palestine, everyone would have loved to play, "Who Wants to be a Messiah?" To be the triumphant warrior that won back national pride and put those Romans and their collaborators in their place would be the grand prize! Jesus, however, was firmly focussed on Isaiah 53, on the Suffering Servant model of the Messiah. Jesus was telling his disciples that the Messiah will be the Suffering One, the Rejected One, and his triumph, his victory, will be of a very different sort than what most people imagined. His kingdom will be of a very different kind than that assumed by the disciples.

Mark tells us that Jesus spoke "quite openly" (Mark 8:32) about the pain and suffering that lay ahead. Other versions read, "He spoke plainly about this...." (NIV; RSV) or "He told them all this quite bluntly." (PHL) And, if any doubt remains about the road ahead, including its implications for Jesus' own followers, Jesus adds, "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?" (8:34-36)

What is the Depth of Your Commitment?

Jesus' plain talk about pain and suffering does not capture the public imagination. It didn't then. It doesn't now. Put next to such perennial favourites as selfishness and greed, pain and suffering come in a distant second. Self-denial is not one of our strong suits. It's not the first thing we like to mention to people going around church-shopping! It is not in the temper of our times to appeal to sacrificial living.

A Suffering Servant may make for good hymns, but we're more comfortable with a "Jacuzzi Jesus"—a Jesus who leaves us feeling relaxed, warm, and bubbly. To find favour with the Jacuzzi Jesus is to be blessed by health, wealth and happiness, a life

blessed with a perfect spouse; perfect, artsy, academically-inclined children; and a perfect, well-paying career. Did Jesus not come that we “might have life, and... have it...abundantly?” Surely Jesus is not calling us to live a life of gloom and doom? Surely it wasn't his intention that we loathe ourselves and the 21st century style of life to which we've become accustomed? If we despise the wonderful gifts God has given us, aren't we despising the Giver as well?

Mention anything about pain and suffering, especially martyrdom, in our modern context, and even church leaders rush to “Deny. Deny. Deny.” Not self-denial, but denial of self-denial. As plainly and candidly as Jesus talked about pain and suffering, even preachers, who should know better, will say that the call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is not about denying ourselves. Self-denial does not suit the prevailing Zeitgeist. The irony is that those who hold to this Zeitgeist are a pathetic minority, for the century just completed saw more Christians martyred for their faith than any other century. The average per year, of those killed for their Christian faith, was 150,000. 150,000 martyrs per year! (Documentation exists in Paul Marshall's book, *Their Blood Cries Out*, 1997, as well as in David C. Barrett annual tabulations of facts about Christians. For example, an estimated 160,000 Christians were martyred in 1996 because of their Christian faith; countless others were raped, beaten, tortured and subjected to unimaginable horrors, according to Barrett's “Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1997,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 1997. See also Jeff Jacoby, “Christian Suffering is on the Rise,” *Boston Globe*, December 4, 1996. Paul Marshall adds, regarding persecution, which he limits “to those who face violence, imprisonment, torture, and death for their faith, not those who experience legal impediments to the exercise of their faith, as painful as these can be,” that presently 200 million Christians live in situations of persecution and another 400 million live in situations of legal discrimination and oppression.)

To ask the question, “Who Wants to be a Martyr?” puts the wrong spin on Jesus' plain talk about pain and suffering, for the answer is obvious. No one. No one wants to be a martyr, but it may be more in line with the gospel to ask, “Who is willing to be so committed to faith in Christ that he or she is willing take all the possible consequences?” Or, “Who is willing to love others whatever the cost?” Real martyrs find themselves in that position only because of their overriding commitment to something much larger. The depth of their commitment to the welfare of others is so extraordinary that they go to extraordinary lengths to look after others.

Mennonite Christians should readily understand this perspective, for our history is replete with stories of courage and martyrdom, some quite recent. Less than a century ago, in Russia, many of the men in a certain town were compelled to join the army to fight against the revolutionaries. A Mennonite mill owner began to notice that the women whose husbands had been co-opted into the army were having difficulty managing their businesses and farms, and were running out of money and provisions. He mentioned it to others in the church community, but they were hesitant to get involved; they didn't want to take sides and risk possible retaliation by one side or the other.

The mill owner, however, sensed God nudging him to do something, and so he told all the women in town that they should come to him for flour, even when they no longer had any money. He made flour available to them at his own expense, and when the revolutionaries heard about him they came around, intending to destroy his mill. The women, however, came and encircled the mill. To get to the mill owner, the soldiers would first have to kill the women, which they refused to do. Several times the soldiers

came to destroy the mill and every time the women circled it, protecting the one who had given his fortune and food to keep them alive. Finally the soldiers came at night, captured the mill owner, and burned his mill. (Told by John Sharp, cited by Tim Weaver, Deep Run East Mennonite Church) No doubt such actions seldom make it into modern business plans.

Our response to Jesus' plain talk about pain and suffering, however, may be a barometer of the depth of our commitment to him. Our Gospel lesson invites us to look at ourselves and to ask ourselves what kind of soil (Matthew 13:3-9) the seeds of the gospel have found in our hearts. Are we so shallow that the gospel hardly makes a dent in our self-indulgence? Are we initially rhapsodic about the gospel, yet fail to provide it rootage any deeper than our short attention span allows? Does our commitment get strangled by the first diversion that comes along? How deep is our commitment to Christ? How deep is our commitment to the One who loves and cherishes us to a depth beyond measure?

Joseph Ton was the pastor of a Baptist church in Rumania while that country was under Communist rule. His preaching bothered the authorities, who arrested him and threatened to kill him. Ton said to the arresting officer: "Sir, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Sir, you know my sermons are all over the country on tapes now. If you kill me, I will be sprinkling them with my blood. Whoever listens to them after that will say, 'I'd better listen. This man sealed it with his blood.' They will speak ten times louder than before. So, go on and kill me."

The officer sent him home. Ton confesses, "For years I was a Christian who was cautious because I wanted to survive. I accepted all the restrictions the authorities put on me because I wanted to live. Now I wanted to die, and they wouldn't oblige. Now I could do whatever I wanted in Rumania. For years I wanted to save my life, and I was losing it. Now that I wanted to lose it, I was winning it." (Paul L. Larsen)

Madeleine L'Engle talks of a similar spiritual dynamic with respect to creativity. She writes, "In order to allow ourselves to be creative, we have to relinquish control and overcome fear. Why? Because real creativity is life-altering. It threatens the status quo; it make us see things differently. It brings about change, and we are terrified of change. ... Creativity comes from accepting that you're not safe, ...and from letting go of control." (Fast Company: How Smart Business Works, online magazine)

Cyprian (died 258), a third-century North African martyr, wrote to his friend, Donatus, "This is a cheerful world as I see it from my garden under the shadows of my vines. But If I were to ascend some high mountain and look over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see: brigands on the highways, pirates on the sea, armies fighting, cities burning; in the amphitheatres men murdered to please the applauding crowds; selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair under all roofs. It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians—and I am one of them."

Prepare Now for Martyrdom

One does not overcome the world or become master of one's soul in one fell swoop. To "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30) is an acquired commitment. The courage and moral victory of the early martyrs was a hard-won victory, borne of many days of spiritual discipline.

It reminds me of a story of a wealthy man who went to his priest with a cheque for fifty thousand dollars made out to the diocese, and intended, he said, for the Lord's work. He handed the cheque to the priest and the priest studied it for a while. It was a lot of money! Then the priest handed it back, and said, "Take it to the bank and cash it. And ask for the money in one dollar bills. And then spend one dollar at a time doing the Lord's work."

The man was astonished. "That will take the rest of my life!" he said.

"That's right!" answered the priest.

Giving of ourselves in little, daily acts of love may not be glorious, but it is the way to prepare for larger contributions or crises. No doubt many of you have seen the movie, "Dead Man Walking". Some of you went to hear Sister Helen Prejean, on whose life experience the movie is based, when she visited Ottawa last year. The movie focussed on the Sister's relationship to a death-row inmate who killed two teenagers (1977).

Lloyd LeBlanc is the father of the boy that was killed in that incident, and on the night of the murder the police brought Lloyd to the crime scene to identify his son's body. And there in the cane field, he knelt beside his dead boy—"his two little eyes sticking out like bullets"—he later recalled, and he prayed the prayer years of faith had taught him to pray in any situation—the Lord's Prayer. And when he got to the phrase, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," there was no hesitation; he simply cried out, "Whoever did this, I forgive them."

One does not simply decide one day to do a great and courageous thing. One does not aspire to martyrdom. Martyrdom, however, is eminently understandable if you have spent years preparing for it by daily faithfulness to Christ. One couple (Donald & Cathy Sensing) decided early on that their children would not participate in sports teams that required Sunday games or travel. A small gesture, perhaps—larger for some—but at least one example of foregoing the path of least resistance in our attempt to be faithful to Christ.

No doubt the Church has erred, at times, in promoting teachings that despise the flesh and this world, and glorify pain, but we have gone to the other extreme. We see suffering as a deficiency, something to be fixed with medical or legal or therapeutic intervention. We have been schooled to pursue every advantage we have, and to rid ourselves of any discomfort we have or cross we bear just as fast as we can. Our culture sees no honour in suffering; in fact, those who suffer can very easily find themselves objects of pity, even scorn.

Perhaps a helpful Lenten exercise would be to spend some time meditating on the pain and suffering of Christ, and in so doing temper the usual perspective on pain and

suffering. Consider, to that end, stories of those who have been moved by Christ's pain and suffering, in this case, not surprisingly, a saint and an artist.

It is said that Saint Teresa (1515-82), when she was over forty years old and had been in a convent for years, one day noticed a picture depicting the Lord being scourged. She had seen the same picture hundreds of times before, but at that particular moment of revelation she saw it in a new light. She saw God suffering—suffering for love of her. She fell to her knees, sobbing in wonder. This was the great divide in her life, the experience that changed everything. She said that she arose with a “sense of unpayable debt.”

Consider too the “Isenheim Altarpiece,” a work of art created by Matthias Grünewald (1475-1528) in the early sixteenth century for the monks of Saint Anthony's Monastery in Isenheim in Alsace. The monks commissioned Grünewald, asking him to present their chapel with something that would bring healing and cleansing to the poor and diseased, especially those afflicted with a horrible, gangrenous, putrefying disease known as St Anthony's Fire, named, as were the monks themselves, for a fourth century hermit (St Anthony 251-356) who himself had known great suffering.

Grünewald created a painting with panels that open. Painted on the closed panels is Christ's crucifixion, described by someone as the most gruesome, tortured, agonized, tormented, almost unbearable crucifixion scene ever painted. Under a monstrous crown of thorns is a dangling, pitiful body with twisted limbs, covered with countless lacerations and rivulets of blood. It is a scene of unbearable agony.

Apparently few people come to see the altarpiece anymore. I'm not surprised. Says one reviewer, of the painting, “The crucified Lord leans down in to our space, crushing us, leaving us no escape, filling the painting with his agony. We are hemmed in by the immensities of darkness and mountain, alone with pain, forced to face the truth.” (Nicolas Pioche, WebMuseum, Paris)

It prompts enough questions to fill a whole Regis show. This painting was supposed to uplift people suffering their own private hells? No doubt a crucifixion scene, rendered in great detail and on a very large canvas, would be a powerful image in a hospital filled with pain and suffering, but helpful? How did the monks expect the sick to find healing in this work of art?

The answer is in the successive revelations unveiled by the opening of the altarpiece. When the wings of the panelled altarpiece are opened, the dark, deserted landscape and blue-black sky are driven away by a blaze of light. Opened, the poor, sick pilgrims stood in awe before three spectacular panels, the first, the Annunciation; the second, the Angel Choir; and the third revealing the most glorious resurrection scene ever portrayed, with Jesus exploding from the grave. It's an amazing vision of God's saving and healing love—God's transforming love, transfiguring all flaws, fears, failures and brokenness.

Jesus “endured the cross, disregarding its shame,” says the New Testament, “for the sake of the joy that was set before him....” (Hebrews 12:2)

How about us? What will it be? The Jacuzzi Jesus? Or the Suffering Servant?

Final answer?

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.