

Reflection for Sunday, September 16, 2018

Based on: Mark 8: 27-38

Offered by: the Rev. Liz Bowyer

For the people at Trinity United, Vernon, BC

Last weekend I had the privilege of being on retreat with 18 other United Church women at MacKenzie Camp.

It was a restful but also meaningful time of learning in community as together we pondered matters of the heart.

Indeed, we all felt very blessed by the thoughtful presence of our retreat leader, Allison Rennie.

Talented teacher, facilitator, mentor, and friend to many of us here, Allison offered exceptional leadership as she encouraged and guided us in our reflections and in our sharing over the course of the weekend.

At one of our worship circles, Allison invited us to think deeply about what it means to be wholehearted about something.

As you might imagine, there was a wide variety of responses to what wholeheartedness looks like.

For example, when I think of wholeheartedness, I think of being fully immersed in whatever I feel passionate about.

For me, wholeheartedness is not about partial involvement, fence sitting, or standing on the margins.

For me, wholeheartedness involves plunging in to the deep end of the pool rather than tiptoeing into the water via the shallow end.

For me, being wholeheartedly committed feels comfortable and easy most of the time.

But then, as was raised in our circle with Allison, how do we stay committed when something unexpected happens, say, like when our assumptions are tested or our expectations are not met? How do we stay committed when we feel fearful?

What happens to that wholeheartedness when we feel unsafe or when things take a different turn than we assume or expect?

What if, indeed.

Here in this morning's text from the gospel according to Mark, we hear firsthand how wholeheartedness in terms of discipleship means one thing to Peter and quite another to Jesus.

For Peter, being wholehearted about discipleship has to do with his claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the longed-expected Holy One who has come to turn the world up right side up.

For Jesus, however, his understanding of himself as Messiah and of Peter as his number one follower are quite different.

For Jesus, messiahship has little to do with the world's understanding of leadership.

For Jesus, messiahship has much more to do with a self emptying and suffering love that is nigh unto impossible for Peter to grasp.

And so it is, that the two find themselves wholeheartedly disagreeing with one another as to Jesus' purpose and mission and as to the costs of such self emptying love and suffering.

But Jesus doesn't stop there.

You see, Jesus in his clarity of self understanding is not deterred by Peter's hopes of branding Jesus' mission in a way that folks can buy into.

And so it is here in this passage, Jesus continues to foretell not only his destiny, but also offers a cautionary tale for all those who choose to follow in his Way.

“If anyone wants to become my followers”, he tells all who have ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to feel, “then let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (2)

For those first followers, living as they did under the oppression of the Roman Empire, the image of the cross would be well understood as the chosen instrument of torture as a way of suppressing insurrection.

Jesus’ words here would have surely struck great fear in the hearts of those gathered at Capernaum to hear his teachings.

And who might blame them?

It’s hardly a compelling invitation, is it to ‘take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Perhaps even less so for us gathered here some 2000 years after the fact.

Or to paraphrase Will Willomon, renowned Episcopalian theologian, it’s hardly a slogan we would want to post in our newspaper ads or on our website. (1)

Be that as it may, it seems that Jesus has yet more to teach all those who have ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts to feel in the eighth chapter of Mark’s gospel as he continues to describe the costs of discipleship this way.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the good news will save it.” (2)

These are beautiful, comforting, costly, confounding words, and paradoxical words Jesus offers in response to Peter’s declaration of faith.

Jesus’ words, “For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the good news will save it” are words that offer us a shimmering clarity of a self understanding that is mind boggling at best and terrifying at worst.

The last time I had a chance to reflect on these words with you was near to the start of the season of Lent.

Lent, the season in the church calendar year, is the time when we intentionally revisit the stories of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his death on the cross.

Here this morning, these words come to us once again as we anticipate picking up the loose threads of our ministries after a summer's break.

In terms of the actual church calendar year, though, we also find ourselves close to the end of the season after Pentecost, the time when we're told the Holy Spirit was poured out on the assembled body and the church as we know it was born.

Soon and very soon, we will be wrapping up the church calendar year and anticipating a whole new season, the season of Advent and the stories from our tradition that take us back to the very birth of Jesus.

For all of these reasons and more, it seems timely for us to re-consider this morning's text from Mark's gospel and its invitation to bring our whole hearts to the ongoing project of calling ourselves disciples or followers in the Way of Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I need to hear this invitation again and again.

I need to hear this invitation from Jesus again and again to test out the depth and breadth of my own willingness to wholeheartedly follow in the Way of Jesus.

I need to hear this invitation from Jesus more than once so as to be guided, nurtured, shaped, and formed by the stories found in our canon; stories of the One who spoke truth to power, who loved the last and the least, and whose healing presence has the power to call us out of places of hopelessness, defeat, and despair to healing and wholeness and joy.

Perhaps this is the case for you also or perhaps not.

Wherever you find yourself along the continuum of answers to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" the good news for today is that here in the United Church of Canada, there is room for us to ponder how wholeheartedly we choose to respond.

However, I urge you not to leave that pondering too long.

For, unless and until that work is accomplished, then, and only then will we really be able to enter in genuine ways into responding authentically to our call to be a Christian community in this time and in this place.

My fondest prayer is that our assumptions and expectations will not trip us up; that our fears will not immobilize us, and most of all that we will not get lost along the way.

My fondest prayer is that we will be able to leave our false starts and our disappointments at not having our expectations met on the sidelines and find new ways to truly engage in wholehearted ways with Jesus' claim on our lives.

For all of this and more, I pray that it may be so.

Amen.

*The impetus for some of the thoughts in this morning's sermon come from the following resources

1. www.asermonforeverysunday/tag/willwillomon.org, YrB28, June 4, 2015
2. Harper Collins Study Bible, page 1933
3. Becoming Human, Jean Vanier, copyright 1998, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, House of Anansi Press Ltd.