

“Choices” – Mark 8:31-38

This week certainly started out with things getting a bit testy. Beginning first thing on Tuesday morning with a confrontation with a homeless person who had set up camp in our parking lot – and taking two full parking stalls with his treasures! – and then moving on later in the day to a bit of a head-banging with our building partner, the week got off to a fairly tense start. It wasn't a lot of fun since I find confrontational situations most unpleasant. And to cap the week we've walked right into the middle of a tense confrontation in our Gospel reading this morning. It's a bit like arriving in the middle of a family fight and if you've ever had that experience – sadly I suspect most of us have – then you probably remember clearly just how tense a situation that can be. You likely also know that words spoken in tight anger linger long after those who spoke the words wished they could take them back or better yet not have uttered them at all. However, once angry words are out they often live on forever, and this reading is an example of that.

To set the context, recall that just before we stumbled into this awkward situation in Mark's gospel Jesus had asked the disciples “who do people say I am?” to which they replied, “some say John the Baptist, and others Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.” Jesus then asked them who they say that he was and Peter declares “You are the Messiah.” And that's where it starts ... Jesus “*sternly* ordered them not to tell anyone about him.” Peter makes a confession of faith, and is immediately rebuked and told to be quiet.

So some dissension has already built by the time we come into the picture just as Jesus begins to outline to his disciples the difficult and deadly path that lies before him, a path that will include all kinds of nastiness including suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. Peter's impulsive reaction was to rebuke Jesus privately, but the rebuke and counter-rebuke went public with Jesus tearing Peter apart in front of the rest of the disciples. How could things have escalated so quickly; how could they have gone so bad so fast and so deeply? How could Jesus have attacked Peter so viciously, turning on him in public, ripping him apart with such humiliation, even calling him the evil one? Almost always fear underlies anger and that may be at work here. In any event, I believe the real answer lies in the importance of this moment, this critical point at which everything changes, where Jesus' ministry takes a definite turn towards Jerusalem and towards the staggering events that will happen there.

Up until now everything has been fairly rosy for Jesus and his merry band of followers. From a modest start in the Jordan River his mission and ministry grew steadily, as one by one and two by two Jesus called particular people into close association, to become not merely his students and followers but the core upon which he would rely. The crowds eagerly assembled to hear him preach and teach, gathering to be fed on his miracles and on his words. The adoring crowds brought to Jesus those who were in need, and they watched him heal their sick, making the deaf to hear and the lame to walk and the blind to see, and even those with eyes could begin to see the power of God at work in him. Especially the disciples thought they could see clearly who this strange man was and what a glorious future lay before him.

But Jesus knew differently. Jesus knew with great clarity and certainty the path that was laid out for him to follow. Jesus could see plainly all the way to Jerusalem, to his betrayal and trial, to a painful death on a cross, and even to the glories beyond. But first that path would lead painfully through humiliation and shame, and the knowledge of that must have been a burden upon Jesus as he shared the happy part of his mission and ministry with his closest disciples.

Many of us have been in that same difficult place, carrying a burden of knowing with clarity unhappy times to come, trying to find the right moment to reveal it to relatives and close friends. I suspect all of us have had that burden at least once in our lives. And to make matters worse it always seems that while we are waiting to find that right moment to reveal our bad

news, the people around us are particularly happy in their not knowing the troubles to come, making the burden of revealing the bad news to them even harder.

This is clearly one of those moments for Jesus - walking along the road, the disciples close at hand, the crowds tailing along behind, a babbling bubble of excitement and happiness in the Mediterranean sunshine. The disciples are happily reflecting on the successful events of the recent past, remembering feeding teeming crowds not only with morsels of food but with the word that is the bread of life, absorbing the adulation of the crowds who recoiled in awe at Jesus' healing powers, the excitement of that near-death experience on the lake in the boat.

But in the midst of all this excitement and happiness Jesus reflected upon the dark events that would soon unfold, and so it was necessary that the disciples know that truth also. With this tense exchange Jesus began to outline to them what he could see down the road, a painful path that led to the Son of Man being subject to great suffering, rejection, even death, and after three days rise again. He did not spare his disciples, using soft words and hushed whispers. "He said all this quite openly" the text tells us, discussing it like it was the most natural thing in the world, seemingly oblivious to the mind-bending contrast that this horrible picture made with the disciples' images of power and glory.

The disciples were stunned! How could he talk this way?! How could he begin to imagine that such horrible things would or could happen to him, when he clearly was so powerful that nothing could harm him? Could he not see that with such incredible, such divine power in him he was like a god, he was like God himself, was above and beyond being hurt let alone being killed. And so it was no surprise that Peter, de facto leader of the band of students, would take Jesus by the arm and lead him off to one side. "What are you thinking?!" Peter began, boldly taking it upon himself to rebuke the teacher, to help Jesus see the obvious error of his ways. Can't you just hear Peter upbraiding Jesus, "What's the matter with you? Are you losing it? How can you even imagine such things happening to you? What nonsense! You'll lose all the good will you've built up so far if you start pushing such crazy ideas!"

Peter's reaction was not at all uncommon. Many close friends and loved ones react in exactly the same way when someone announces really bad news such as their impending death. Denials, protestations, imprecations of false cheer flow forth in total irrelevance to the seriousness of the moment. But time was of the essence, and so Jesus not only jumped on Peter for his response but also turned to the crowd and began to urge upon them the importance of understanding what was really important.

Impending death does that, doesn't it? Death - whether ours or that of someone close to us - looming in the near future sharpens our perspective on the meaning of life, brings into clear focus what is important and what isn't. The certainty of death coming soon causes us to stop and reflect upon what are our most important values, our essential values. One of the things that people do when they are contemplating the time they have left is to create what is called a "bucket list" of things they would like to do while they still have time, and such a list reveals what is truly important to them.

Here Jesus rather forcefully urges Peter, and thus the other disciples who are watching all this most likely with their mouths hanging open, to re-assess their essential values. "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Jesus demands as he challenges Peter to shift his focus from human things to divine things, to shift his essential values to loftier and more meaningful goals. And then Jesus called the crowd together so that all could hear, and sternly challenges them in the same way laying out how they also need to determine whether their essential values in life included following him or not.

Now, if we can get past the heat of that moment, if we can step back from the somewhat passionate exchange between Jesus and his disciples, if we can cool down the rhetoric a bit, I

believe it is possible for us to hear a message of grace in here. Once we filter out the harsh negatives – which apparently left a deep and lasting impression on the disciples who bore the full blast – there remains a powerfully positive message here. When we hear this with the ears of those who have already taken up crosses and are following him we can hear clearly “those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Here Jesus presents clearly the essence of faith, the essence of life: choosing what is important. We all face making choices, and the choices we make define our faith. Jesus explicitly declares that those who choose grasping greed over compassionate service may amass all the toys, all the creature comforts, but they will lose out where it really counts – with God. Those who devote themselves to obtaining power over others will be powerless to explain their actions before God. Those whose essential values include ripping off the poor by stealing their meager housing allowances have already lost their own lives through losing any real meaning to their lives. Implicitly, the reverse is true also, that those whose essential values include putting others first are themselves first in God’s eyes. Those who show they are not ashamed of Christ or his words by giving of themselves in order that the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the disconsolate are consoled are in turn proudly embraced by Christ himself.

So, what are our essential values? What do we consider to be the most important things in life? This Season of Lent is a very appropriate time to pause and to reflect on what our spiritual bucket list looks like. Do we even have a spiritual bucket list? If we had to define in the next week, or couple of weeks how we wanted to be remembered, would we have to stop and think about what that might entail? This Season of Lent is a truly appropriate time to hear once again those questions and to reflect on the choices that lie before us as we also once again ponder the road to Jerusalem, to the cross, and to the empty tomb.