March 4, 2012

Show Me the Way: When the Teaching Is Hard
Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 8:31-38

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.”

This morning we need to start by asking ourselves what in the world is going on in this story. It’s not an easy one to hear or to understand.

“The Son of Man,” Jesus says, “must undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed, and after three days rise again.” Not what Peter wanted to hear at all. Not what most of us think we want to hear. We could say that in this critical passage in his telling of the Jesus story, Mark has launched a powerful re-branding campaign. But will it sell?

Re-branding is what companies do when they create a new name or symbol or design or “look” for their product in order to reposition themselves vis-à-vis their competition or move “upmarket,” or when they want to create a new message for their company. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.

Coca-Cola launched “New Coke” in 1985 and that campaign failed miserably. Kentucky Fried Chicken is trying to make a go of it as “KFC.” General Electric did alright becoming GE. International Business Machines caught on as IBM.

Just recently the Southern Baptists did some work on their brand thinking that a denomination born out of the defense of slavery needed a new look, a new name, to reverse their declining numbers. They thought that maybe the word “Southern” limited their appeal and sent the wrong message. They created a Task Force to work on this, but the best they could settle on was an option for congregations who wanted to make a change. “Great Commission Baptists” or “GCBs” is what they came up with based on what we call the “Great Commission” of Jesus—go into all nations and make disciples.

Interesting idea, but re-branding is tricky business. Somehow I don’t think GCB is going to catch on, any more than Campus Crusade for Christ’s attempt at calling themselves simply “Cru” to avoid that pesky association with the Crusades, hardly the high point of Christian history.

Let’s look again at Mark’s Gospel and see how his attempt at re-branding fares. These verses from the 8th Chapter are a critical, pivotal passage in his story. Up ‘til now, pretty much, it’s been a pretty
cool ride with Jesus, this new Messiah person. Travels through Galilee. Healing sick and troubled people. Jesus, the great story-teller, drawing crowds to hear his popular parables. And there were miracles, too. Feeding thousands with a few scraps of bread and fish. Walking on water. And the kind of bad-boy fun part of sticking it to the religious authorities. It had been a pretty fun ride. ’Til now.

Everything changes. Re-branding. New message. Jesus makes an outrageous declaration that shatters all previous conceptions of what the Messiah would do and be. “The Son of Man,” Jesus says, “must undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed, and after three days rise again.” Not what Peter wanted to hear at all. Not what most of us think we want to hear. Peter is so shocked, he rebukes Jesus. He wants to silence him. Can you imagine? Jesus responds by rebuking him. “Get behind me, Satan. You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.” (NJB)

Do you feel the hurt and anger in this exchange? These closest of friends, these companions in the Way, lashing out at one another? Contending over the heart of the message?

Jesus turns and looks out past his disciples, calling the crowds to come, any who will listen. What must they have thought when they heard his words that day: If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, saw this as the tension between what he called the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. The theology of glory is built on our assumptions about how we expect God to act in the world. It’s still really popular today in the teachings of the Joel Osteens and others who prefer the upside of what God can do—glory, success, accomplishment, the good life, riches, honor. This theology of glory packs ‘em in. Follow this God, the theology of glory entices, and all this will be yours as well.

Contrast that to the theology of the cross. Suffering, denial, rejection, folly, meekness, humility, self-giving love. That’s a really hard sell. And Jesus is saying that it’s not only what he’s about, but it’s what is asked of those who would follow him.

Thank goodness Jesus didn’t live in 21st century America. That rebranding campaign would have been nixed long before it was ever launched. A non-starter, the critics would say. No way that message will fly, Jesus.

I submit to you that at first glance, we might be tempted to the same conclusion. Don’t we prefer a faith that is not only less-demanding of us but one that would promise tangible benefits if we sign up?

Let me suggest a different way of looking at it. It is Lent, after all. So here’s what I’d offer to those re-branders who want to try and sell this approach. Think of it this way. We humans have a funny way of getting things backwards more often than not. We tend to think that God is with us when things are going great. We say we’re “blessed” by all the things that make us happy and give us joy. We think God is with us when we are happy and on top of the world. That’s the theology of glory and it’s really tempting and enticing. Jesus saw through it as another ploy of Satan to confuse us and set our hearts on the wrong things.

Our God actually offers us something so much more valuable, more precious than gold. It’s not about making us feel better. It’s about saving our life.
Friends, as we come to the Table this morning, I invite you to again ponder this great gift of God to us in Christ Jesus, this cross that will sustain and uplift us through the most frightening and perplexing and painful things life may throw at us.

If you still want to give up something for Lent this year, stop rebuking Jesus by perverting the true gift he offers. Give up the theology of glory. Go with the re-branding, the theology of the cross.

Here’s a real life example of how this works. You’ve heard the news of the devastating tornadoes and storms that hit the Midwest and South. In the town of Piner, Kentucky, most everything was destroyed—businesses, schools, homes. Somehow, the Piner Baptist Church is still standing. They got their power restored and are feeding and sheltering townspeople round the clock. Their pastor, Rev. B.J. Donahue, said they won’t be having “regular” worship this morning because today, in the midst of everything that has happened, it is their privilege and opportunity to minister to the needs of the people and they’re going to simply continue that work through the day today. And tomorrow. And the next day. And as long as it takes. “Doing the work of Jesus,” he said.

In Christ Jesus, God offers to be with us right when we need God most. Not in the glory days, but in the darkest hour. Not when we’re feeling on top of the world, but when everything is crumbling around us. Not when we feel as if we’ll live forever, but when we must endure pain and suffering and loss. That’s when our God promises to be with us. When we carry our cross, we also carry the God who chose to suffer on that cross so that we would know that we are never, ever alone, no matter what. The God of the cross is carrying us. God is with us.

This is the message. This is the source of our hope. And therefore, with the Apostle Paul, we can proclaim with absolute assurance: “…I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

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