

“I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”
Mark 8:27-38
Sunday, September 13, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

The following graffiti once appeared on a bathroom wall at a seminary. Prepare yourselves; it is highly theological:

“And Jesus spake unto Peter saying ‘Who do men say that I am?’ And Peter answered, ‘Thou art, according to Paul Tillich, the very ground of our being. Thou art Emmanuel Kant's deontological categorical imperative. Thou art the man of the Eschaton, the ultimately determinative one!’ And Jesus looked at Peter and saith, ‘What?’” (Stephen M. Crotts)

A (very) funny rewrite of scripture. Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” (v. 27). The disciples respond – I imagine them calling out names all at once, in popcorn fashion – “John the Baptist...Elijah...one of the prophets...” (v. 28). They name the theologians of their time and tradition.

But then Jesus asks, “Who do *you* say that I am?” And Peter captures it in a nutshell: “You are the Messiah” (v. 29)

Jesus then teaches the disciples about what kind of Messiah he will be. He says that he will be “rejected...killed...and after three days rise again” (v. 31).

Peter is not thrilled with this plan. In fact, he pulls Jesus to the side and quietly rebukes him (v. 32). “No way, Lord; you’re talkin’ crazy talk!” Jesus rebukes Peter and goes on to say:

“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” (v. 38).

Billy Graham puts it this way: “When Jesus said, ‘if you are going to follow me, you have to take up a cross,’ it was the same as saying, ‘Come and bring your electric chair with you. Take up the gas chamber and follow me.’ He did not have a beautiful gold cross in mind -- the cross on a church steeple or on the front of your Bible. Jesus had in mind a place of execution.”

Jesus paints a picture the disciples don’t want to see. He and Peter argue heatedly over the cross. Peter wants a crown for Jesus. Jesus explains that there can be no crown without the cross. And, by the way, the crown Jesus wears is not an earthly crown. The disciples do not understand. They do not want to understand. To them the cross is a symbol of shame.

Are you ashamed of the gospel?

I. The shame of the cross.

Philip Yancey shares a story from the memoir of Pierre Van Paassen, who wrote about the years before WWII: “Paassen tells of an act of humiliation by Nazi storm troopers who had seized an elderly Jewish rabbi and dragged him to headquarters. In the far end of the same room, two colleagues were beating another Jew to death, but the captors of the rabbi decided to have some fun with him. They stripped him naked and commanded that he preach the sermon he had prepared for the coming Sabbath in the synagogue. The rabbi asked if he could wear his yarmulke, and the Nazis, grinning, agreed. It added to the joke. The trembling rabbi proceeded to deliver in a raspy voice his sermon on what it means to walk humbly before God, all the while being poked and prodded by the hooting Nazi, and all the while hearing the last cries of his neighbor at the end of the room.”

Yancey comments, “When I read the gospel accounts of the imprisonment, torture, and execution of Jesus, I think of that naked rabbi standing humiliated in a police station. Even after watching scores of movies on the subject, and reading the Gospels over and over, I still cannot

fathom the indignity, the SHAME endured by God's Son on earth, stripped naked, flogged, spat on, struck in the face, garland with thorns” (Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew).

Neither can Peter and that is why he protests so much. That the Messiah, whom he now recognizes, should suffer at the hands of the Roman enemies on a cruel and shameful cross is unthinkable.

And yet we do get the suffering. Over 2000 years later, you and I do get it. We don't want it, but we get it. If you've ever seen “The Passion of the Christ,” or if you've simply read the biblical accounts, you know of Jesus' suffering. How he is beaten and taunted and tortured. And this is *before* they nail metal spikes through his hands and feet and leave him hanging on the cross for hours, in pain, slowly suffocating from the weight of his own body.

The suffering we can wrap our minds around -- all too easily, sad to say, given the horrors and sufferings of this world. It's painful; we want to turn away. But we know and understand suffering. We often find comfort in a Savior who suffers with us, a Savior who knows our suffering.

The shame is, perhaps, not as clear.

It is, however, very real – especially for the disciples.

Part of the shame is that their vision of an earthly king -- filled with power and might -- has been shattered. Jesus has not come to toss out the Roman occupation force. Jesus is now executed as a criminal by that same Roman power.

And there's more of the shame – Jesus, their rabbi and friend, their teacher, their spiritual leader, their example, their companion in the mission field – Jesus has now been arrested, convicted as a criminal, imprisoned, tortured and executed.

How many of us would claim a criminal on death row as our friend, let alone our Lord

and King?

It's shameful. The disciples don't want to hear it. Peter refuses to accept it.

Of course, for you and me in our modern, secular society, the shame factor is more subtle. In our everyday lives we may deny Jesus, pretend we don't know him, because it isn't fashionable. Only quaint, silly, small-minded or misled people believe in that Jesus nonsense.

D.L. Moody comments: "There are very few who in their hearts do not believe in God, but what they will not do is give Him exclusive right of way. ... They are not ready to promise full allegiance to God alone. Many a professing Christian is a stumbling-block because his worship is divided. On Sunday he worships God; on weekdays God has little or no place in his thoughts. I want people to place their faith in Jesus and motivate them to live more obediently."

II. I am not ashamed.

In the verses just prior to today's reading, Jesus heals a blind man. According to v. 24, the first healing doesn't quite take: "I can see people," says the blind man, "but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus touches him again, and he is completely healed. His eyes are opened. What an encouragement for us!

It's good news! Even if we are ashamed of Jesus at times; even if we are ashamed of the gospel in certain settings, there is hope for us. Jesus can touch us again. Our eyes can still be opened. Like the blind man... like Peter and the other disciples, after Jesus was raised from the dead.

The cross is "an emblem of suffering and shame," as we sing in that great old hymn. "The Old Rugged Cross." We sing it in contemporary Christian music, too: "I am not ashamed of the gospel...the gospel of Jesus Christ." I am not ashamed of the cross. I am not ashamed of Jesus or his words.

Those who take up their cross and follow Jesus prove that they are not ashamed of the gospel.

There was a little boy who was just learning about addition and subtraction in school. He looked up during worship one Sunday, saw the cross sitting on the altar and hollered, “Look, Daddy! There's a plus sign in our Church.” (Billy D. Strayhorn).

It's true, isn't it? The cross – crazy though it may seem – is a plus sign in our Church and in our lives. It's a reminder of the good that God can bring out of suffering. It's a reminder of the good God can bring out in you and me when we repent and receive the forgiveness that Christ won on the cross. God transforms a symbol of torture and execution into a symbol of life and freedom. Through the plus sign of the cross, God brings triumph out of tragedy; glory out of humiliation; hope out of despair; justice out of oppression.

Are you ashamed of the gospel?

III. Giving our all for the gospel.

Most of us know C. S. Lewis as the author of The Chronicles of Narnia – “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” being one of the most popular of the Narnia books. What many folks forget, or don't know to begin with, is that C. S. Lewis held the chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, and that he was an agnostic until he was “Surprised by Joy” – the title of a book he wrote about Christ coming into his life. In his book, Mere Christianity -- Lewis's brilliant defense of the faith – he writes:

“Christ says, ‘Give me all. I don't want so much of your money and so much of your work -- I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and there; I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural

self instead. In fact I will give you myself, my own will shall become yours.”

Jesus doesn't want half-measures; he wants our all. He gives all of himself; he wants his will to become ours.

The cross is a symbol of shame, but to Christians it is a symbol of victory.

Closing.

Do you feel called to recommit yourself this morning? Can you say it with conviction?

I am not ashamed of the gospel!

Let's say it together: I am not ashamed of the gospel!

Again: I am not ashamed of the gospel!

And again: I am not ashamed of the gospel!

If it's true; if you and I are not ashamed of the gospel, then let's recommit ourselves to living the gospel outloud, in public, with abandon.

Let's tell someone! Share our faith with another person. Let's be of service to someone. Deny ourselves, and put someone else first. Let's give sacrificially to the work of the Church, to the work of God's kingdom. Let's accept the cross. There's no crown without it. Let's truly understand that Jesus is a Servant King, and follow him. Let's take up our cross & follow Jesus.

When Jesus first touches the blind man, the man looks up and says, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." Jesus touches him a second time, "and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly" (Mk. 8:24-25).

If accepting the cross is still a struggle for you, as it was for Peter and the other disciples, hear the good news: Jesus will touch you again. Be faithful, be ready; your eyes will be opened.

If you're ashamed of the gospel today, you still have a chance to embrace it tomorrow.

But don't wait too long. You're missing out on the reward: A new life! Amen.