

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 1, 2015

"On Being Cross Eyed..."

Mark 8:31-38

Have you ever said something really dumb? Or said something that came out all wrong? I know I've said a lot of dumb things or just plain wrong things like the time I was preaching about the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. I know I clearly had Isaac written in my notes but I called him Isaiah throughout the entire sermon. There was one Sunday morning when the opening words to my prayer made everybody laugh. As we got ready for the morning prayer, what I meant to say was, "Let us bow our heads and pray silently while the organ plays." But what I actually said was, "Let us bow our head in a moment of prayer, while the organ plays silently..." Agnes, the organist sat there with her fingers frozen in midair over the key board and a puzzled look on her face which clearly said, "How do I play silently?"

I personally think it's encouraging to know that other people make some kind of mistakes. It makes me feel more normal instead of feeling like a dingy, which is probably how Peter was feeling after his encounter with Jesus in this morning's Scripture passage.

It's encouraging to know that someone of Peter's stature and importance in the early church, could walk the walk so well with his foot in his mouth. What we have to remember is that Peter was human and even the greatest of humans make mistakes.

Henry Ford changed the world. He changed how things are assembled, marketed and how we travel. But did you know he forgot to put a reverse gear in the first car he invented? Not only that, but he didn't build a door wide enough to get the car out of the building he built it in. If you go to Greenfield Village in Michigan, you can still see where he cut a hole in the wall to get the car out

I give thanks to God that we don't have to be perfect to experience God's grace and forgiveness, not to experience new life through Jesus Christ.

In this passage we hear pretty strong rebuke from Jesus to Peter. Jesus had just changed Peter's name from Simon to Peter, the Rock. The Rock upon whom Jesus would build the church. Peter had to be feeling like a champ and on top of the world. The future had to be bright and sunny. And then Jesus starts talking about going to Jerusalem and being crucified. The bright and sunny world suddenly crumbled before Peter's eyes.

Peter took Jesus aside, questioned Jesus and took Him to task for talking like that. Jesus then rebuked Peter in front of all disciples. Jesus was Cross Eyed. He had focused on the Cross and gave Peter a Cross Eyed talking to. Jesus reminded Peter of the purpose of Jesus' ministry. Not comfort but the salvation of the world and that meant the cross.

So what does this passage teach us? (Keep our mouths shut?) How do we apply it? Can we keep from making dumb mistakes or saying dumb things? Probably not. But it does teach us some very important lessons about following Christ and bearing our own crosses.

What it does tell us is that We're Not the Center of the Universe. That's the first thing the cross always reminds us of. And yet, that seems to be the hardest lesson we have to learn.

As funny as it is, our world is goggled up with people who think like that. They think the world revolves around them.

The Cross of Christ changes that attitude. The cross changes us. When we accept the rebuke of Peter as our own and look at the world Cross Eyed like Jesus, then we become less like the world and more like Jesus.

I read that Mother Teresa once heard of a family whose nine members were starving to death. So she quickly got some rice together, went to the family and gave them enough rice to prepare a meal. But the woman of the house divided the rice into two piles, placed one of the piles in a bag and started to leave. Surprised, Mother Teresa asked where she was going. The woman said she was going to visit another family who she knew was starving also. That, friends, is living Cross Eyed. It reminds us that we're not the center of the universe.

It also reminds us that we're called the People of the Bruised Shoulder. Jesus calls us to a life of discipleship; a life that begins with the empty tomb and responds to the Good News of our salvation by asking us to become the people of the bruised shoulder.

In Medieval Europe it was common for devout Christians to pray for the marks of the crucifixion of Jesus to appear on their hands and feet. It was known as the stigmata. It was seen as a sign of deep spirituality and special

favor from God. One night while praying for such marks, a certain monk had a vision of Christ with another mark on his body, a bruise on his shoulder; a bruise from carrying the cross. The monk realized that the bruise was the mark which counted. The shoulder bruised from carrying the cross.

You see, the cost of our discipleship involves cross bearing. Bearing the cross means voluntarily taking on the burdens of others. It means choosing to carry burdens for the Kingdom of God. Sometimes it even means suffering for the sake of Christ. We have recently heard of the martyrdom of the twenty-one Christians who were killed by ISIS for their faith. They could have converted to Islam and saved their lives, but they chose to be true to their Christian faith.

The Christian faith always begins with the cross and leads to the cross. It begins with Christ dying for us. And through that service it leads to a life of service, a life of carrying our own cross, a life of the bruised shoulder.

The cross reminds us WHOSE we are: we belong to Christ. And the cross reminds us WHO we are: we are FORGIVEN, those who have been saved by grace. The cross reminds us that on our own, things will never be perfect. On our own, we will never be whole. On our own, we will never find peace. On our own, we can never know forgiveness, reconciliation or redemption.

The cross reminds us that no matter how hard we try, we just can't do it on our own. But through the grace and love of God in Christ, we CAN know these things. The cross is a powerful symbol of our salvation and of our relationship with Christ.

The cross reminds us that it changes lives. We know that because it changed our lives. It definitely makes a difference, not only in our life but in the lives of others as well.

There is an old story about two brothers. They were likable enough young men but they had a little bit of a wild streak. It got so wild that they became sheep thieves. They earned their money by stealing sheep from the local farmers.

As happens to all thieves, one day they were caught. Rather than kill them, the villagers decided to brand the two brothers on the forehead with the letters S.T. for sheep thief. The action so embarrassed the one young man that he ran off, never to be heard from again. The other brother was so filled with remorse that he chose to stay and reconcile himself to the villagers he had wronged. At first the villagers were skeptical. Most of them wouldn't have anything to do with him. But he was determined to make reparation for his offenses.

Whenever there was sickness, the sheep thief was there to help care for the sick person. Whenever there was work that needed to be done, the sheep thief showed up to help. It made no difference whether the person was rich or poor, the sheep thief was there to lend a helping hand. Soon he was an integral part of the community, never accepting pay for anything he did. His life was lived for others. As a consequence, he grew to be a friend of all and well-respected.

Years later, a traveler came through the town. As he sat at the sidewalk cafe eating his lunch, he noticed the well-respected old man with the strange brand on his forehead, sitting at a table nearby. It seemed that everybody in town stopped to pay their respects or share a kind word. Even the children stopped to play or give and receive an affectionate hug.

The stranger's curiosity was peaked and he asked the cafe owner about the old man, "What does the strange brand on his forehead stand for?" The cafe owner, much younger than the old man, thought for a moment then said, "It happened so long ago that I don't rightly remember. But I think it stands for Saint."

The Cross of Christ and the Gospel of Christ changes lives. It turns sinners into Saints when we surrender to God and become people of the Bruised Shoulder who walk with Jesus.

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Look to Jesus. Be Cross Eyed in your faith.