

02-25-2024 Worship Service

Morning Prayer – Ronda Lee has asked for our prayers on her behalf; she's having a lot of trouble with vertigo and hasn't been able to work recently.

God, we are grateful to gather as your people again this morning in this place and in this congregation. Thank you for the members of Open Road, for their families and friends that are here worshiping with us this morning. Thank you for their gifts of music and their willingness to share those gifts with us. Bless each person here; may your Spirit move in needed ways for each one.

Thank you for the ways your Spirit accompanies us through our days and our experiences – sometimes detected but often not. We pray for our children, that they may continue to learn and grow in stature and in wisdom. We pray for teachers and all who work and interact with our children to guide and mentor them. We pray for those who leave their homes each day to go to work and for those whose work is at home. Be present and tangible in our lives. And God, we want to be present to you as well. Help us to remember to pray – to listen and watch for you and to seek your wisdom. Give us a renewed and heightened sense of your Spirit's presence and guidance as we move through our routines and schedules. Help us to reach out to others and be your Light reflected in our world.

O God, we pray for Ronda as she recovers and tries to regain her balance; thank you for healing that has already happened for her and in others we know who've been sick and are recovering. We ask for continued healing and well-being for friends and family who are experiencing pain, illness or discomfort. We pray for the residents and staff of Bethesda, many of whom are our family, friends and neighbors. Continue to bless them and the ministry of caring that happens there. We pray for others at various homes – Kidron, Showalter, Pine Village, Paramount, be with each resident and with the staff as well.

Thank you, God, for the retreat that happened here yesterday, for Pastor Luann's leadership, for the questions that were asked, the thought-provoking conversations, the relationships that were strengthened, and again, for the ways your Spirit was moving in the midst of it all. Be with us as we continue to discern and discuss how we sense you calling us forward, faithfully into the coming months and years.

Loving God, we *know* that you have the whole world in your hands... even so, we confess that sometimes it doesn't feel like it. Sometimes it feels pretty out of control and like it's in the hands of a lot of selfish and greedy humans. Lord God, we need your Spirit of compassion. Fill us with the words of the prophet Micah – you have shown us what is good. To do justly, love mercy and walk humbly. We pray for humble, strong faith, for courage and encouragement. We pray for your children near to us and around the world whose lives are upended by fear and violence. We pray for those who are working daily, round-the-clock to respond with love and

care. We pray for all your children everywhere; we remember that each one is made in your image, loved and gifted by you.

We offer all of our prayers in the name of Jesus, the suffering servant Messiah. Amen.

Message – Pastor Lois Harder

2024-02-25

Following Jesus is a Journey

Mark 8:31-38

Mark Twain said, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me; it is the parts that I do understand.”

The Gospel of Mark gives us some hard-hitting words today, so hold on. As one commentator wrote, “There’s little in this teaching that requires deep-sea exegesis. It is plain, hard and inescapable.”

Although the lection for this morning is just verses 31-38 of chapter 8, I asked the youth to read the whole chapter to give us a little more of the context. (Thank you all.)

Already back in chapter 6 Jesus had fed a crowd of 5,000 and then we heard at the beginning of chapter 8 he does it again – with 4,000. In both situations we read that “Jesus had compassion for (the people)”. In chapter 6 he had compassion because the people “were like sheep without a shepherd”. Here, in chapter 8 he was compassionate because the crowd had been with him for 3 days, faithfully following and listening to his teachings. In both cases the disciples were incredulous, wondering how on earth all those people could be fed with such limited resources. Now Jesus is impatient – in the middle of Chapter 8, for the third time in the narrative, there’s no bread. But now there aren’t big crowds; it’s just Jesus and the disciples in a boat. Ironically, they’d just gathered scads of leftover bread, but apparently they forgot to bring any of it along. Jesus scolds them, “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you STILL not get it? Do you have eyes that don’t see and ears that don’t hear? Don’t you remember that I fed 5,000 people with five loaves – and 12 baskets left? And just now I did the same thing with seven loaves for 4,000 people – and 7 baskets left? And still... you don’t get it?”

Then all of a sudden they were at Bethsaida and some people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to heal the man. Jesus healed him by putting his spit on the man’s eyes. And after he could see clearly, Jesus told the man NOT to go into the village, presumably so that all the crowds wouldn’t find out right away about this miraculous healing.

In verse 27 it’s just Jesus and the disciples again and they’ve gone all the way up to Caesarea Philippi – which is about 25 miles north of Bethsaida. But it’s an important location for the power of the story. Caesarea Philippi was a large, Roman city, named after both Herod Philip and the Roman emperor Ceasar. So as Jesus and his disciples traveled through the small villages around this powerful, Roman city Jesus was telling them about *another* kingdom, a different kind of kingdom, and he wondered whether his disciples recognized who he truly was.

So while they were travelling, Jesus asked his disciples the question, “Who do people say that I am?” He heard this variety of responses – John the Baptist (interesting, since he had just been murdered by King Herod in chapter 6, just before the feeding of the 5,000), some say you’re Elijah and others say you’re some other prophet. “But who do YOU say that I am?” And sure enough, Peter the impetuous pipes right up, “You are the Messiah.” And Jesus commands them not to tell anyone about him.

Now we come to today’s passage. Peter had just made this momentous, remarkable proclamation that Jesus is the long-awaited, foretold and promised, glorious, honorific Messiah – the savior of their people and all people. Jesus neither confirmed nor denied Peter’s decree. He just gave them the command. Now, this word “command” or “sternly ordered” is the same Greek word that’s used when Jesus silences the unclean spirits – epitemesen (EH-pih-tem-EE-suhn). It’s a strong word. It means he shut them down. This same word is used two more times in the next three verses.

Immediately after Peter’s lofty proclamation, Jesus began to teach them that he would endure great suffering and rejection by all the institutional big-shots. In fact, he would be killed and after three days he would rise again. He said it quite openly. He was blunt, to the point, not sugar-coating anything. But Peter was not having it. The one who had just identified Jesus as the Messiah now takes that same Messiah by the arm and tells him to epitiman – shut up (be quite)! Jesus responded to Peter – in front of the other disciples – in a way that he never spoke to any other human – he only said this to the unclean spirits. No, YOU epitemesen! You are like Satan to me right now, Peter. You’ve gone too far. You’ve taken on authority that is not yours to take – and it is devilish. You’re trying to understand what I’m teaching you in human terms; you *have* to open your mind to think in divine terms. This is not a gentlemanly disagreement. There’s no conflict avoidance in this conversation between Jesus and his overly enthusiastic number 1 disciple. Peter had gotten into water that was way over his head and Jesus was snatching him back into line in no uncertain terms.

And suddenly there was a crowd again and Jesus called to them and explained, “If ANY of you want to be my followers, you’ll have to deny yourself and take up *your* cross and follow me. 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.”

This is Mark’s no-nonsense, no holds barred way of explaining God’s upside-down kingdom. It’s just the opposite of what human, earthly creatures expect. In fairness to Peter, he called Jesus “The Messiah” after watching him perform miracles that healed people’s diseases and gave them back their dignity, fed multitudes because he had compassion on them, cast out demons and then shut them up so they couldn’t continue to torment and shame people, he healed children and women who otherwise had no status or standing in their society, he chose uneducated fishermen and hated tax collectors to be in his inner circle, he gave teachings and told stories that challenged the integrity of those who were in power by exposing their hypocrisy.

It's no wonder that Peter jumped to the joyful, justice-loving conclusion that Jesus had come to kick Rome in the... knees. But that wasn't at all why he had come. He had come to remind them, the disciples, the crowds, those he healed and fed and restored – of who *they* were. They were the beloved.

It was they who had a covenant relationship with God. They were the ones who could trace that relationship with Yahweh back for generations. The Old Testament reading for this morning is from Genesis – the familiar story of Abram and Sarai becoming Abraham and Sarah, having a baby in their old age, trusting in God's covenant promise to make their descendants exceedingly numerous. Jesus came to remind his own people of THEIR covenant with Yahweh. They had been chosen to be a light to the nations, to show the world this upside-down kingdom of God...a kingdom in which their king is a servant who suffers and dies at the hands of those in power because of his radical compassion and love for those who are oppressed. And anyone who recognizes the goodness and the truth of Yahweh in this upside-down way of living can follow Jesus and be part of the covenant people too.

But you can't have it both ways, Peter. God is love. And if there's going to be any vengeance for the sake of justice, that's up to God. And if you're going to follow Jesus, you're going to have to commit to an ongoing struggle to speak for justice, to act for justice, to love mercy and walk humbly, to take up your cross and endure the worst that Rome can come up with, knowing, trusting that resurrection is on the other side.

I'll leave you today with a poem by Jan Richardson called

Beloved Is Where We Begin

If you would enter into the wilderness, do not begin without a blessing.
Do not leave without hearing who you are;
Beloved, named by the One who has traveled this path before you.

Do not go without letting it echo in your ears,
and if you find it is hard to let it into your heart, do not despair.
That is what this journey is for.

I cannot promise this blessing will free you from danger,
from fear, from hunger or thirst,
from the scorching of sun or the fall of the night.

But I can tell you that on this path there will be help.
I can tell you that on this way there will be rest.
I can tell you that you will know the strange graces
that come to our aid only on a road such as this,
that fly to meet us bearing comfort and strength,

that come alongside us for no other cause than to lean themselves toward our ear and with their curious insistence whisper our name:

Beloved, beloved, beloved.

Amen. I invite you to join in the prayer of confession...

Prayer of Dedication – please stand...

Giving and forgiving God, we dedicate these financial offerings to you with grateful hearts. We ask you to bless these gifts, as well as all the good gifts you've given us, as we give of them with generosity and joy. Amen.