

Lent 2B 2018, February 25, 2018, Mark 8:31-38, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA,
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I beg your forgiveness this morning for this sermon. For I fear that I'm not going to be very coherent. You see, the awful shooting at Parkland High School a week and a half ago, and the responses to that tragedy, are more than troubling to me. I feel that somehow I should address what has happened and what is happening in light of the gospel, but I really don't know where to begin. I've sought some guidance in prayer and in scripture, but I really don't know where to begin or even where to go. So this sermon is really my attempt to come to grips with the scripture appointed for the day in light of what we're seeing unfold in our world.

Let me first begin with the Word of God. It seems to me that's really where we need to start, knowing that all the rest that's swirling all around us in the world will somehow be addressed by that Word. In our gospel reading Jesus speaks openly about the necessity of his own death. He is quite explicit. He will die not in any general sense, but will die because he will be rejected by the governing authorities. His death will come with "great suffering" and it won't be a natural death, but because he is killed.

Peter rebukes Jesus for all this. Remember, Peter had just finished saying Jesus was the Messiah. The long-awaited and expected savior of the Jewish people, who would lead a rebellion against Roman oppression. The Messiah was going to return Israel to former glory. Jesus dashes Peter's hope for victory to the ground. Messiah's don't suffer and die. Messiah's lead armies to victory. For me the pertinent question is this: what's behind Peter's rebuke of Jesus? I believe it's fear. Peter fears what will happen if Jesus is right. All hope in glory is dissolved. Peter is afraid. Afraid for a future that will bring suffering and death. For if they kill the leader they will come after the followers as well. That's why Peter rebukes Jesus. Peter is afraid of a future that no longer includes a Messiah making Israel glorious again.

Jesus turns the rebuke around on Peter. "You are fixated on earthly glory," Jesus says. "You need to be looking at this from God's perspective." So misguided is Peter that Jesus attributes his words as coming from the very mouth of Satan himself.

Jesus moves directly to the implications of a suffering and killed Messiah. Those who follow him must deny themselves and take up their own cross. Following Jesus will involve losing life in order to save it. The converse is just as true; those who seek to save their lives will lose them.

What could Jesus possibly mean by this? Coming directly on the heels of Peter's rebuke I believe Jesus is telling his disciples to embrace, take up, the thing they fear the most and make it their own. That's why Jesus says to "take up their cross." Notice that's the first time he mentions the cross. We all know that's how Jesus died. But the cross was the preferred instrument for terrorizing the population. Public executions by crucifixion occurred all the time throughout the Roman empire. Everyone feared the horrible and agonizing death of crucifixion. And that's the very thing Jesus tells his followers to embrace.

So here's where my struggle finds its focus point at this particular moment. What is it that we so desperately fear that we are called to embrace? What is out there that threatens to dash all our hopes to the ground that we are called to take up?

In light of all that happened in Florida and the responses in the wake of this tragedy I believe it reveals, for me at least, a crippling fear of suffering and death itself. We are so afraid of dying that we do everything in our power to stave it off and hold it at bay. Debbie Thomas, an author reflecting on this very question writes more eloquently than I, so I offer her words: "To be

fair, contemporary western culture encourages me to do this, (to deny the power of death). What would Jesus say, I wonder, to the multi-million dollar industries that invite me to deny my mortality through cosmetics, fashion, leisure, sex, entertainment, real estate, sports cars, weight loss, beauty? What would he say to a culture that glorifies violence but cheapens death? What would he say to my own frightened heart, that prioritizes self-protection over so much else that matters in this life? What if Jesus's call is for us to stop clutching at this life so desperately? To step out of the vicious cycles of denial, acquisition, terror, and violence that seek to cheat death, but in fact rob us of the abundant life Jesus came to give us?"

And while Debbie Thomas is surely right, that much of our culture focuses on denying our mortality, this doesn't go far enough. Not in light of Florida, or any of the rest of schools, neighborhoods, or any other place where violence reigns. So she asks the question that's also been on my heart this week," What, after all, does a citizenry that owns 300 million guns have to say about fear? About *enslavement* to fear? What would it look like, in this time and place, to lay down our fears so that others might live? To willingly set aside our own interests and (dare I say it?) our own rights, so that we could prioritize what Jesus called the great commandments: to love God and love our neighbors *as ourselves?*"

I ask this question first of myself. What do **I** so fear that I need to take up and embrace in order to follow Jesus at this moment in time? I believe it's this: *Making a public statement that you are going to interpret as motivated by partisan politics.* So this is my personal public taking up the cross I believe Jesus is laying on me today.

The proposal to arm teachers in our public schools is in direct contradiction of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When I first heard this it had the immediate feel of simply being false, not merely from the point of public policy, but of Christian morality. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not arguing for gun control in general. I believe that people of good will can disagree and come to compromise on those issues. But the specific proposal to put guns in the hands of teachers, no matter how much training you give them, is so totally outside the realm of what we value for our teachers and students and our education system as to be incomprehensible to me, not just as a citizen of this country but as a follower of Jesus.

Here is where Martin Luther is helpful, I believe, with his understanding of Christian vocation. God calls people into particular roles and offices in life. The duty we have is to respect the particular vocations to which we are called, and not to mingle them together. Some God calls into the service of public protection; policemen, fire fighters, first responders. And some God calls into education; teachers and professors and administrators. The vocation of the police is to protect and to serve. The vocation of the teacher is to teach. We violate the vocational integrity of each when we require one to do the job of the other. Surely we want our schools to be safe places where students can be taught by teachers whose entire focus is directed towards their students. How we protect our schools and other public places is the realm of public debate and policy making. But asking teachers who already have a God-given vocation to take up the role of another vocation properly belonging to the police cannot be one of them.

I must admit I didn't know when I started this sermon this is where I would end up. So I offer it up to you this morning as my own personal witness, of my own discipleship, of my own attempt to answer Jesus' call for me to take up my cross and follow him. Where Jesus asks you to take up your cross and follow him may be surprising to you. I know it's surprising to me. Amen.