

# To Give, Not Grasp

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Mark 8: 31-38 “In Blackwater Woods” by Mary Oliver

Second Sunday in Lent

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Well ... Jesus is certainly not the model of a great public relations man this morning ... he certainly isn't saying things that would make folks want to join up ... perhaps he hasn't read the book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Because let's think about what it is that he is promising to those who follow him ... in this passage from Mark's gospel ... he is promising them suffering, scorn, shame ... and finally ... a horrible death ... not things most of us are standing in line to sign up for.

So I guess we shouldn't be all that surprised or disappointed ... that Peter had something else in mind ... that Peter's idea of what a Messiah should be and do ... meant taking on Rome and defeating the empire ... not the other way around.

We can understand how Peter couldn't get on board with Jesus' vision.

As one of the cartoons in my collection says: “Accurate, shmaccurate ... if you want this story to sell ... it needs some punching up.” And of course ... that is exactly what the church has done over the 2,000 years since ... the church has punched up the story ... domesticated it ... smoothed it out ... made it more palatable for the masses. Convinced us ... that all we had to do was *believe* the right things and *worship* Jesus ... and we could forget all about that following part ... and certainly we could forget about all that “picking up our crosses” part.

One thing is for sure ... Christians have never been shy ... beginning all those years ago with Peter ... about suggesting to Jesus a better way to do things.

Because let's think about it ... we can be very certain that the original audience for Mark's gospel would have heard the word “cross” ... and thought of only one thing ... for them it had only one connotation: It was upon the Roman cross that first century Palestinian dissidents were executed ... crucifixion was a political and military ... and very gruesome and public ... form of execution.

Under the thumb of the Roman Empire ... which 1st century Palestine certainly was ... death on the cross was inflicted above all on the lower classes ... on slaves ... on violent criminals ... on the unruly elements in rebellious provinces like Judea.

For Mark's first audience ... the cross was not a religious icon ... it was an electric chair ... a gas chamber ... the hang man's noose.

So at base what Jesus is saying to his disciples this morning is that there are consequences waiting for those who dare to follow him and challenge the ways of empire ... the ways of imperial Rome.

Jesus is clear: his kind of messiahship seeks distributive justice, inclusion and compassion ... which means confrontation with Rome ... with the occupying powers ... with those who keep the 99% in their place.

But it was also clear that would be accomplished with violence or revolt.

Now we need to be clear ... Jesus isn't saying here that suffering is required for suffering's sake ... or that suffering is the point ... rather he is saying that suffering is sometimes ... is often ... the result of such faithfulness to the ways of God.

And so it is no wonder I suppose ... that in all these centuries since Jesus lived ... we have decided his story ... like that cartoon says ... needs some punching up ... not surprising that even the church itself has re-written Jesus' story just a bit ... dressed it up ... made it easier to swallow ... no wonder that the church so often taught us to concentrate on our beliefs about ... and admiration of ... Jesus ... our worship of him ... rather than to do the much riskier work of following him.

We have domesticated Jesus ... and so often made him simply a nice guy ... even turned this 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian Jew into a guy with white skin and blue eyes ... who wants us to be nice people. A gentle soul sentenced to a horrible death by God's own self ... so our sins could be forgiven ... and we could get into heaven ... in some far off day.

As a culture we have learned to use that phrase "that's our cross to bear" pretty loosely ... we use it to describe both small and large frustrations and hardships in our lives ... instead of what Jesus meant when he used that phrase ... that we are called to follow him in pushing against those people and systems that enslave ... that oppress ... that exclude others ... all those things that prevent the saving work of God.

In the words of the martyred German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer ... we are called to be the stick in the spoke of the empire's wheel.

Most of us will never be called upon for this kind of costly discipleship ... not called upon as Jesus' first disciples were ... and not as Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in Nazi Germany ... we won't literally be asked to die rather than to accept a watered-down version of what it means to follow Jesus ... we won't be asked ... to literally lose our life to save it.

Rather for most of us ... this pushing against empire ... this carrying of our cross ... this being the stick in the spoke ... will look very different ... but it may still be heroic.

And perhaps one of the first steps we can take this morning ... is really thinking about what Jesus meant when he said, "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 ... will save it."

Now much Christian tradition would say Jesus is talking here about heaven and hell ... that saving our life means getting to heaven ... and that losing our life means being assigned to hell.

But the author and theologian Marcus Borg ... among many others ... challenges that notion in his book, *Speaking Christian*.

Borg says that what that word “save” meant in Jesus’ day ... what Jesus meant and what the biblical writers meant when they used that word ... had nothing to do with heaven and hell ... rather it had everything to do with being set free ... truly free ... free enough to recognize the presence of God in our midst ... in this life.

In other words Jesus is telling us this morning we need to be saved from self-preoccupation ... saved from exile in the foreign land that is our culture ... saved from a journey that takes us away from God and neighbor.

For Jesus ... what “saves” a life has nothing to do with belief ... and everything to do with action ... with the living of our lives ... day in and day out ... literally with the choices we make.

We are seeing such action ... such choices ... taking place with the young people in our country since that last mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. They are angry ... they are passionate ... and they are witnessing to what they know. They are literally taking their bodies into the streets. And by doing all of that ... they are confronting empire ... their school administrators ... their senators ... their governors ... their president ... the NRA ... all of whom are pushing back.

Some school administrators are saying the students will be expelled if they walk out of school in protest ... some gun rights supporters are saying they are paid actors ... some people are saying they are too young and too emotional and so they shouldn’t be listened to ... and reported on ... by the media.

And yet these young people give every indication they are not going away ... that they will continue to be that spoke in the wheel ... that they will continue to lead all of us ... in resistance. I’m sure they aren’t all Christians ... maybe none of them are ... but they are acting a whole lot the way Christians are called to act.

These kinds of actions ... these kinds of choices ... are what will “save” their young lives – literally perhaps – but also figuratively. Theirs are lives that aren’t grasping for money and status and power over others ... but rather lives that are witnessing to the wrongs of this world ... lives that want to make this world a better and safer place for all people ... lives that will matter.

And so friends ... we might want to allow these young people ... with all their courage and passion ... to teach us what it looks like to “save” our own lives ... to show us what it means to carry the cross ... the way Jesus uses that term.

These young people are taking actions that place a stick in the spoke of empire to use Bonhoeffer’s term ... saving their lives by losing the life of apathy and indifference and benign neglect ... they are getting outside of themselves and trying to make this world better right now ... not in some far off heaven.

When we are honest ... we know what destroys our lives ... what takes us to that cliff where we lose our lives ... all those things that keep us concentrating on ourselves ... that keep us grasping instead of giving.

Things like *greed* ... wanting more and more ... *power* ... especially the desire for power over others ... *rigid intolerance* ... based on moral certainty ... and perhaps most of all ... *fear* ... fear that barricades us from our best selves. Because all those things ... greed, power, intolerance, fear ... become a dangerous brew upon which the empire ... both political and religious ... thrives.

About all of that ... Jesus was pretty clear ... we should push against it ... we should be the stick in the spoke ... that is the cross he calls us to carry.

The kingdom of God that Jesus spoke of so often ... more than anything else in the gospels ... was this very earth we are living on ... populated by same very clueless human beings like us ... and yet people who have these moments when we get outside of ourselves ... when we start giving and stop grasping ... when we walk the same trajectory as Jesus.

And in those moments when we do that ... this earth is transformed ... and we can see God shining through.

This season of Lent calls us to slow down ... take inventory ... walk into that other narrative ... and allow ourselves such moments. This season of Lent calls us to recommit our lives to making such moments happen ... as individuals ... and as church.

I want to end by sharing with you an interesting footnote to the story of these high school students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Perhaps you ... like me ... have been wondering who Marjory Stoneman Douglas was ... who was this woman whose name is on the high school that these young people attend?

Well ... she was a life-long activist and is credited with saving the Florida Everglades from development ... and with the creation of the Everglades National Park.

In an interview before her death, she said: “Be depressed, discouraged and disappointed at failure ... and the disheartening effects of ignorance and greed and corruption and bad politics ... but never give up.

“This thing’s got to be done.”

It would seem these students got the message. Amen.