

# Sermon for Sunday, February 28, 2021 - “Speaking the Truth in Love”

Second Sunday in Lent  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Daniel Grainger, Seminarian

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Up until this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ ministry has been a rapid progression of healings, miracles, and teachings (in the form of parables). According to Mark, Jesus begins his ministry with the proclamation: “*The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*” (Mark 1:15)

Jesus wastes little time getting to the point, and the momentum of his ministry builds exponentially. There is energy and excitement surrounding Jesus which draws the admiration of thousands, but also the ire of religious leaders. And so, it doesn’t take long for the rumor mill to kick into high gear:

“Is he John the Baptist?”

“Is he the Elijah?”

“Is he one of the prophets?”

“Who is Jesus?”

Jesus asks his followers, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:27-29) Peter gives voice to what many are probably thinking: “You are the Messiah.” Similar to how we might look for a role model, a charismatic leader, or a hero to swoop in and save the day, many were eagerly looking to Jesus as the one who was anointed with God’s power and would save Israel, liberating them from their Roman oppressors. Jesus neither confirms nor denies his identity as the Messiah. In fact, “He sternly ordered them NOT to tell anyone about him,” (Mark 8:30) which only seems to intensify the situation. The anticipation is so palpable, you can almost taste it!

But THEN we come to today’s gospel reading and the tone changes to something more ominous: “... the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again,” (Mark 8:31). The murmurs begin: “*Wait, what is this? This can’t be right! What is Jesus talking about?*” This is the first time that Jesus speaks about his death and resurrection, and it seems so very different from what the disciples were anticipating. And to make matters worse, Jesus is being quite open about all of it.

Peter isn’t having it – he pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. I imagine Peter said something like, “*This isn’t right, Jesus – you are mistaken. The Messiah isn’t supposed to die.*” Peter’s preconceived notions of who Jesus is do not align with what Jesus is saying. So, he rebukes or corrects Jesus. Peter denies the notion that suffering and death have any part in what Jesus is here to do for God’s people.

Jesus' response to Peter is jarring and harsh: "*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things,*" (Mark 8:33). Then, Jesus ups the ante: "*Those who 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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*" (Mark 8:34-35)

Not only is Jesus NOT conforming to their expectations, those who wish to follow Jesus will share in his suffering and death. This is probably not quite what Peter and the disciples had imagined. But Jesus loves them enough to tell them the truth: "This is what it means to be my follower: losing one's life for the sake of the gospel." "*Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,*" (Mark 8:34)

It's a truth that leaves me feeling uneasy. How can suffering and death be good news for you and me when there is so much suffering and death in the world already? At times, I'm tempted to soften the blow – to find some interpretation that is easier to proclaim. For instance, perhaps the cross is just a metaphor for the hardships we will endure by living counter-culturally? But just like that, I realize that I, like Peter, am rebuking and correcting Jesus.

The truth is, the invitation to take up one's cross would not be interpreted metaphorically by Jesus' followers or the crowd. The cross was not some abstract concept for them but a reality – it was an instrument of suffering and death used against those who upset the status quo of the powerful. Jesus meant what he said: "*Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*"

The truth matters and has the power to change lives, sometimes in ways we don't always expect or even want. In fact, the truth can be a difficult pill to swallow, especially when it conflicts with our own understanding of who we are and what is going on in the world. As a country, we continue to struggle with the truth of our own history – who we are and what we've done. Like Peter, we may have our preconceived notions of what's up, a rose-colored view of our nation's history. Yet recent efforts to uplift the experience of those who are black, indigenous, and people of color – to shed light on their ongoing struggle for justice – have revealed a difficult and painful truth: We are captive to the sin of white supremacy and cannot free ourselves.

Half a million deaths from COVID-19 confront us with the reality that our well-being is deeply connected to our neighbors. Like Peter, we are tempted to deny the reality of such suffering and death. During this pandemic, our culture's self-made, pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps individualism has had dire consequences for the most vulnerable among us, and has revealed a hard truth: We have NOT loved our neighbors as ourselves. As God's people, we continually fail to trust God's promises, seeking instead to earn God's love on our own. Yet the brokenness and suffering of the world reveals the truth: We sin against God in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and even by what we fail to do.

But God loves us enough to tell us the truth.

There's this great line from the TV show *Parks and Rec* that used to run on NBC that I will jokingly say to my friends when I'm giving advice or suggestions: "*You can trust me because I*

*don't care enough about you to lie.*" In reality, I think it's safe to say we tend to be a bit more receptive to the truth when it is given to us by someone we trust because we know that, no matter how difficult their words may be, they care about us.

The hard truths – the kinds that set us free – are spoken from a place of love. Yet, God's love for us is a difficult thing to fathom. And so, Jesus reveals the truth of God's love for us in the cross. God knows what it means to stumble under the weight of sin and death, what it feels like to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, what it means to lose everything.

God loves us enough to tell us the truth. And even if we can't understand the truth, or won't accept it, God does not give up on us. In fact, Jesus will foretell his death and resurrection two more times in Mark's gospel; and each time his disciples will demonstrate their failure to understand or accept what he is saying. And yet, in the end, these flawed individuals are the people Jesus calls, equips, and sends out to share and show God's faithfulness and love for all people.

As followers of Christ, our call to proclaim the gospel means learning to hear and speak difficult truths. This is not easy, for it means facing our sins and the real ways we have perpetuated suffering and injustice in the world. We are called to speak the truth in love, even when it is not easy or convenient; for in Christ we trust that the Holy Spirit is present and working to bring about new life, even in the places we least expect it or least want it.

God loves us enough to tell us the truth.

As we follow the Lenten road and Jesus' journey to the cross, the grace of God empowers us to hear and speak the truth in love, for the sake of a world in need of something new.