



Sermons

From Northwood United Church

"Listening to the deep: Resurrecting Jesus"

2 Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

For followers of Jesus, we live in interesting times. Have you noticed in the last number of years, Jesus keeps popping up in the strangest of places? Some years ago he appeared on the cover of MacLeans Magazine. And not that long ago, on the cover of Time. And again in 2012 on the cover of Newsweek. And often there is either some interest in an archeological find about Jesus, or some pop culture sensational question raised by a historian, but most often it has something to do with keeping Jesus but rejecting church. That was Newsweek's shtick.

It would appear that whether or not the church has any traction in society today, Jesus still does, at least the Jesus of pop culture- the image, or the idea of Jesus. Actually following the gospel may be a harder sell what with loving your enemies, and taking up your cross and all, but Jesus still has some cache.

We have been "Listening to the Deep" during this season leading up to Lent, and starting this week we move into a new season where we begin our journey towards the cross, and the events of holy week and Easter. We have been paying attention to the depth dimension of life, trying to listen to the wisdom of the heart, best discerned together, in prayer, and in the deliberate and accidental places life takes us. For this final week in our scriptures we hear two rather poignant stories in which people express a longing to see and experience the depth of things. I just love this story of Elijah and Elisha at the end of Elijah's life. And Elisha the young prophet to be just can't let him go. It is a lesson in grief, but when you get to the heart of it, what is he actually looking for? He is afraid that if he loses Elijah, he will also lose God. "I know that Spirit that you have. I have experienced it. Let me continue with that spirit- a double portion..." In Elijah he has touched the depths and he doesn't want to lose that.

And we have the disciples with Jesus, going up on the mountain and experiencing something deeply mystical that they don't really understand. And there is that voice again, that was there at his baptism, the voice of blessing, but this time there is something else. "This is my son, my beloved. Listen to him." That's different. Not "in whom I am well pleased." It would appear that goes without saying. But "listen to him."

Why the message "listen to him?" Why is that necessary? They had been following him hadn't they? Of course they were listening to him weren't they?

This passage always makes me chuckle a bit because it reminds me of times when say a father is saying sternly to a child, "Listen to your mother!" We all know why that might be necessary. Usually it is because a child is acting like they are listening but they are really not. "Ya, Ya, Ya..." "Listen to your mother." "Listen to your teacher." "Listen to me!" That is necessary only when it is pretty clear the person hasn't been really listening. Listening on the surface, but not really listening to the depth of the message.

Listen to Jesus. We do, but do we really? In the story of Jesus thus far, life has been rocketing along at a dizzying pace with healing, teaching, and things are getting intense. Conflict is brewing. And then Jesus gets to the very core of his message, to the real depth of it, just before today's reading. He says to his followers "Anyone who really wants to follow me must take us

your cross. For anyone who wants to preserve their life will lose it, but anyone who is willing to lose their life for me and for the sake of the gospel will save it. For what does it profit a person if they gain the whole world, but forfeit their life. What can anyone give in exchange for their life." And the disciples, all but Peter go, "what?" Peter, ever brash, steps up and says, "No way Jesus!" and Jesus says, "get behind me, Satan!" And then they head up the mountain, where they hear a voice, that familiar voice, "This is my beloved. Listen to him."

"Listen to him. He is saying something absolutely crucial. If you want to listen to the deep, listen here!"

And when we listen to Jesus we hear him saying, "If I want to preserve, or save or hold on to my life- if that is my goal, I will lose it. But if I am willing to lose it, let it go, I will save it. For how will it do me any good at any depth if I hang on the things of this world, but in the process, forfeit my life. How could I ever replace that." Some translations use the word soul instead of life. "What would it profit me if I gain the whole world but give up my soul. What can anyone give in exchange for their soul."

That, my friends, is Jesus. That is the depth of the gospel right there. Listen to that. Pay attention to that. In this middle section of Mark's gospel, Jesus gets to the heart of things, to their very depth. And at the depth of the gospel, there is what would appear to be a contradiction- I need to lose my life to have it at all, and if I spend my life preserving it, I will not have lived it at all. Or in another way, if I try to hang on to my soul, I will lose it, but if I let go in life, my soul will truly live.

It sounds like a hard teaching, a contradiction. How can you gain your life by losing it? That doesn't make sense. But it is not so much a contradiction as a paradox. It is both very hard and really simple, and it comes down to control, trust, and letting go. As long as we hang on to our life, try to control it, that is how we will spend our lives, keeping things in order, in place, under control. In the process we will not truly live. But as we are able to trust God with our life, to let go of control, to risk, we start to truly live. And that is the truly transformative element at the core of the Christian faith, at the center of the way of Jesus. It sounds like a contradiction but really it is deep wisdom. "Life is of infinite value, but that value is only possible to realize if we let it go." It is all about trust.

Early on in Treena's sabbatical this summer, I wanted to get Treena away from work and all the usual pressures of life so she could switch into Sabbatical mode, and so we spent a week in the Dominican Republic. It was absolutely lovely, mostly because there was nothing that we had to do, and we could truly unplug. I have never been to a place like that. The water is amazing. I think there is a greater level of salt in the water there or something because I noticed we were more buoyant there than here. And I remembered a friend of mine saying that floating on the water is good practice for life as a follower of Jesus. If you tighten up, try to keep yourself on the surface, you sink. But if you just relax, loosen up, let go, you will float. Trust the buoyancy. Trust the buoyancy of God in your life. Let loose your grip so that you are free to live.

My friend and wonderful soulful singer and pianist Louise Rose sings a song that I want to close with: "Throw it away. You can throw it away. Give your love; give your life, each and every day. Keep your hands wide open, and let the sun shine through. You can never lose a thing if it belongs to you..."

Give your love. Give your life. That is the paradoxical way of Jesus- the heart of it, and the depth. Amen