

We have just read a short story from the Gospel of Saint Mark. Each Sunday we read another snippet from the gospel on an on-going reading. But I wonder how many really get the context of these stories? We may hear them as stand-alone readings with some point for us to consider. But we miss the real thrust of Jesus' message to us when we don't know the context. In fact, it is easy then to use a particular quote for our own opinion. People who try to use the scriptures to back their own arguments can be guilty of this. Have you heard the quote, "A text out of context is a pretext."

So where does this reading from the gospel fit in the context of Mark's gospel? Significantly, it is found in chapter eight of Mark's sixteen-chapter gospel. This is the midpoint and it is a turning point. From this encounter everything points to Jerusalem and Jesus' suffering and death.

What might today's gospel say to us? I believe there are two main points. The first is our identity, knowing who we are. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks us. The answer also tells us who we are. We are disciples of the Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Man. Our lives are part of something much bigger than our little worlds.

The second point tells more about this identity, what it means for us. Jesus tells the resistant apostles, especially Peter, that he must suffer to be truly human with us and that anyone who follows him will have to bear their own sufferings. Richard Rohr has said that good religion helps us to deal with our pain. Either we transform our pain into some meaning or we transmit the pain through blame, projection, scape-goating onto someone else. Humanity, and especially love in our lives, will always bring some pain and suffering. We may run away from it, take to drugs or alcohol or some other distraction, but it is still there.

The survivors of the 9/11 bombings know this. Last Sunday's Globe carried the stories of some left behind by people who died on September 11th. Lauren Grandcolas was on the plane that went down in Pennsylvania. She was pregnant with child. Her widowed husband, Jack, is interviewed in the Globe article. He is quoted as saying, "My initial reaction was anger. What I realized quickly was the perpetrators were gone, those that took Lauren down in the plane. The second thing I realized was the ideology of hatred in what caused them to do what they did. In our society, love must conquer hate. So I won't go down the hate path." He

is now writing a book on grief and healing. He is also crusading for the prisoners at Guantanamo who sit awaiting years to be tried.

I don't know whether Jack is a Christian or not. I do recognize that his attitude is what should characterize any followers of Christ. If we are disciples of Jesus, we embrace his way of love, compassion, forgiveness, non-violence, respect for even our enemies. Justice yes, but vengeance no. Jesus says following him means losing our self to save it. This means letting go of our self-centered ego. My freedom is sometimes limited by the common good. This is very evident today in the selfish refusal to wear masks or be vaccinated. Arguments from individual freedom miss Jesus' call to true freedom which means letting go of the fears, denials, hatred and anything else that prevents us from being truly free in our hearts.

Jesus' second point about bearing our pain and sufferings is part of this identity. Grief, the loss of a loved one, difficulties, sickness and many other kinds of pain are part of human existence. I am in wonder at times when I hear peoples' stories and all that they bear in life without bitterness, complaining, anger or depression. They don't deny the pain. They acknowledge and bear it but not alone. Jesus suffers with us in all we endure. We are never alone. And that brings us back to knowing Jesus, being Jesus' friend and teacher, putting our trust and hope in his presence in our lives.

We must never think that pain and suffering are punishments from God. God did not punish Jesus when he suffered on the cross. He does not punish us. The meaning of Jesus coming to our world is to be fully human with us. Jesus is present in this imperfect world, helping us to turn bitterness into serenity, hatred into love. Jesus invites us to join him in his suffering to bring love into our world, to make it a better world and not to add to the pain in others. The real meaning of our time on this earth is found in how much we can learn to really be loving people, to think of others rather than ourselves. That means laying down our lives in various ways to serve others.

Despite all that is wrong in our world, our nation, our church, all is not lost. Human beings, while being capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves choosing again what is good and making a new start.

Jesus calls to each of us, "Follow me." Are we following?

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