

WGUMC March 22, 2015 "Happy Song"
Mark 8:31-38

President Obama's favorite philosopher is a 20th century Lutheran theologian by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr. For more than thirty years, Niebuhr was a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, but before that, he was a preacher in Detroit, during the late teens and twenties.

I read his diary of those early years when I was in my 20's, and I copied down his scattered comments about his Methodist colleagues in the city. He admired how they tackled the injustices of industrialization with real social passion, but he doubted whether they really understood Christ's passion (his suffering and execution).

One day, while walking past a Methodist Church, he looked up at the signboard and read: "Good Friday service this afternoon. Snappy song service." That day, he wrote in his diary, "So we combine the somber notes of religion with the jazz of the age. I wonder if anyone who needs a snappy song

service can really appreciate the meaning of the cross. But perhaps that is just a Lutheran prejudice of mine."

When I started out in ministry, I was of a similar frame of mind. Only a small group would come out for Holy Week services because, I suspected, they didn't get the meaning of the cross. Or didn't want to think about death. Either way, to make up for their missing Good Friday, I had the whole congregation sing the dreariest songs I could find all through the Lenten season.

One year in Eugene, I got a note in the offering plate from a church member. It read: "The opening hymn was the worst yet! It is Lent, the most important Christian season. A time for joy and hope not a time for funeral dirges. [P.S.] Second hymn was not much better!"

So was Reinhold right? Does this mean that Methodists don't get the meaning of the cross? Can't deal with mortality? Are we just modern-day versions of Peter, the disciple in

denial? Remember that Peter is the first in Mark's Gospel to confess that Jesus is the Messiah. Immediately after this, Jesus starts to tell him that the Messiah must undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed, and after three days, rise again. But that's not the "Messiah" Peter had in mind. So, he takes Jesus aside to set him straight.

Now you can imagine what Peter might have said to him. "Come on, Jesus, knock it off. You're bringing us down. Talk like that is going to kill the movement. Everyone thinks you're a superstar, so act like one. You've got to give them what they want to hear. If you don't, you'll lose them. You'll lose me. Listen to me: for your own good, save us the grief."

Jesus looks at Peter as he blathers on and sees a man drowning in denial. Evidently, Peter hadn't paid attention when the words of the Prophet Isaiah were being read to him, especially the part about how God's servant will be "despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with

infirmary." [Is 53:3] Nor does he consider that the Messiah is the servant who "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." [Is 53:5] No, Peter is not thinking of any of these somber things. He's only thinking: this should be a time for joy and hope, not funeral dirges.

But Jesus is thinking: this is not a time for anything but the truth. Peter is focusing on the things that would make the Jesus movement successful. Meanwhile, Jesus keeps in mind the things that will make it faithful. The disciples need to know the way he is bound to go: the way of the cross.

Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Now, before we can begin to understand what Jesus means by this, we need to know something about crosses. For most Protestants, we put empty crosses in our sanctuaries to remind us of the empty tomb. They are a sign of Easter and eternal

life. But for people in the first century, it would have been absolutely unthinkable to have this sign on display in a place of worship. In Jesus' day, the cross was a sign not of eternal life but of the most brutal death. For Jesus to tell someone to take up their cross and follow him could mean only one thing: be prepared to die with him.

So we have to quit thinking about taking up our cross as if we were talking about living with a bad back or a boring job or a sick mother or a sassy teenager. The cross is not so much a burden we bear as it is the kind of life we dare. Jesus is telling us: "Take up this cross and it will take you to places you don't want to go, make you love people you don't want to love. And you will suffer for it, because whenever you love as much as Jesus loved, you run the risk of ending up like him. The Powers That Be will despise and reject you and try to get rid of you. If we really understood the meaning of the cross, we would need some courage to put one in our church.

But if we want to know Jesus, we're going to need a cross and we're going to have to give up our need to be safe and our fear of being sorry. Unless we're willing to lose our life for the sake of his love, we'll never save it.

Deciding that we are going to follow Jesus 'til the day we die and knowing that we could die tomorrow, gives us an incredible freedom to live today. We can go on that mission trip. We can visit in that prison. We can take food to that hungry person. We can admit that addiction. We can make that amend. We can ask for forgiveness. Taking up our cross enables us to take risks for life and love that can never be taken by someone who needs to be in control or who lives in denial.

When I think of someone really living, I think of someone who has been told they are dying. Thursday night, I went to see Claudia Pierson. Not long after I arrived here, her cancer had returned and she was told that there was no cure. And

now, after battling cancer for years, she has started hospice care. If any of you have been fortunate enough to receive her emails over the last few years, you know what a fighter Claudia has been. She has fought not only with her strength but also with her wicked sense of humor. She has been able to turn the most humiliating experience into something hysterical.

But it's not very funny now. As the cancer progresses, so does the pain. She knows the end is getting closer and she doesn't want to suffer. She told me that she is ready. She has planned her service and chosen the music. She wants it to be a fun party and she doesn't want to miss it. She asked me if I'm an Elton John fan, because she'd really like to hear Bob Birnstihl play, "The Bitch is Back." Now that is the Claudia we know and love! A bit later, she was reminiscing about growing up in the youth group in this church and she mentioned how she used to wake up to the old youth group song, "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Speaking of Joyce, when she had her strokes and was still in the hospital, I went to see her and brought along a hymnal. I do that out of habit, because I know that if the person I'm visiting can't talk, I can always sing. Joyce was able to talk, but I was having trouble following what she was saying. So I asked Joyce if I could sing her favorite hymn. Maybe you can guess what it is: "Joy to the World." Now Joyce had escaped from death, but she was still walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Nevertheless, she joined me in singing: "Joy to the World the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king."

Here we have two disciples, close to death and still singing songs of life. It's been years since I've lived in Eugene. I'm older. I'm wiser. And I understand better why people want to sing songs of joy and hope during Lent or any dark time in their life. It's not because they're in denial of death. That's not an option at this church! It's because they are willing to take the risk of love and they need the courage to stare death in

the face and not be defeated by it. If they are able to sneer at the grave, it's because they know that Christ has already given them victory over it.

I have to say of this congregation that, over the last several months, your faith and your willingness to bear that cross and follow Jesus all the way to the end humbles me to no end. So sing a song of joy and hope during this season of Lent, because I know that you are not denying the *reality* of death, but the *finality* of death. As St. Paul's says, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."