Lent 2

Take up your cross and follow me

Mark 8:31-38

A sermon preached at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH on February 25, 2018 by Associate Rector Richard C. Israel.

As I read the Gospel for this morning I was reminded of a colleague in ministry who often told his congregation, “God loves you just the way you are ... and too much to let you stay there.”

Although you and I as readers of Mark’s gospel know who Jesus is, those who followed him do not. Perhaps, Jesus even wondered if his message was getting through to his closest friends, so he asks them in the verses just before today’s gospel lesson, “Who do people say that I am?” When Peter answers by saying “You are the Messiah”, Jesus then turns his idea of what a messiah is upside down. Instead of being powerful enough to overthrow their oppressors and guarantee security for those who had forsaken everything to follow him, the Messiah must suffer, die, and then be raised. Then, he invited the crowd to join his disciples and told them, “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 and the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

I can’t tell you how many times I have preached on this gospel in my ministry, but it still catches me up short every time it appears in the lectionary. Misunderstanding Jesus as Peter did is not confined to those who were his earthly contemporaries. His words, “those who lose their life for my sake will find it” are addressed to us, too. These words hit us in the face, challenging us to give up the priorities we would place first in our lives in favor of Jesus’ priorities.

Think with me for a moment about these questions. What gives you the greatest joy in life? What offers the deepest sense of purpose? When have you felt most alive, most true to the person God created you to be? Karoline Lewis, commenting on the connection of our first reading about Abraham and Sarah to the Gospel lesson, writes: “... what Abraham and Sarah denied was not themselves, but ‘remaining by themselves.’” She goes on to explain, “That is, they deny a life that is autonomous, secured, enclosed, safe, and just the two of them, for a life that propels them into relationship—with God and with a future realized by abounding relationship.”

Last week I received an email from a woman in Connecticut thanking me for a sermon I preached several years ago when I read a parable for our times called Mr. Slef, which is really “self with the insides all mixed up” by Ralph Mattson. In her email, she told me that Mattson is her father and she found my sermon because she had gone on line to Google him after his death earlier that week.

Time doesn’t permit me to tell the whole story, but let me share some highlights. Mr. Slef lived alone in a little cottage that appeared on the outside to be tidy and well-kept, but on
the inside was a mess. The reason it was a mess is that Mr. Slef had a bag of treasure that meant more to him than anything in the world so he carried it around in one hand everywhere he went. With one hand always occupied, Mr. Slef could still wield a paint brush pretty well so the outside of his house looked presentable. But since he couldn’t put down his treasure, the clutter and chaos within his house grew and grew. Eventually, Mr. Slef’s preoccupation left him weak, depressed, hungry and thirsty.

One day, having taken to his bed because he was so weak, Mr. Slef heard a voice outside calling BREAD, WATER. WHO NEEDS BREAD AND WATER? When the man offering bread and water came in to his house, Mr. Slef asked, “Can I have some bread and water? I’m really hungry and thirsty! I really need it bad!”

“Yes” came the reply, “but it will cost you.”

“How much?” Mr. Slef asked, clutching his treasure more tightly as he felt his heart sinking.

“Everything you have in the bag.” The stranger said.

“How about half?” Slef responded.

“Everything”.

“Three quarters? It’s only fools’ gold, you know. It’s not really treasure,” Slef said.

“I know”, said the stranger, “I wouldn’t have asked for it if it was real treasure.”

Slef finally agreed, but then discovered he couldn’t let go of the bag. He wanted to, but his hand kept clutching the bag. “I can’t let go” he said.

“I have a sword. Shall I use it?”

Mr. Slef was shocked, but realized that it was better to lose a hand than starve to death. Nodding weakly, Mr. Slef closed his eyes, fearing the pain. Swiftly the sword descended, severing the bag of fools’ gold at last from Mr. Slef’s hand. With a cry of pain, Slef looked down expecting to see a bleeding stump at the end of his wrist, but his hand was whole. The man threw out the bag of fools’ gold and told Mr. Slef never to bring it back into his house again. Then Mr. Slef sat down to a fabulous meal and bid the man stay with him.

The next day they got up early and together began to repair Mr. Slef’s house. After fixing his own house, Mr. Slef spent his time helping others fix their houses and telling the story of the stranger with living bread and water who taught him that he who loses his life for my sake will find it.

God loves you just as you are…and too much to let you stay that way. Think again about those questions we raised earlier: what gives you the greatest joy in life; what offers the deepest sense of purpose; when do you feel most alive and most fully the person God created
you to be? My guess is your answer doesn’t have anything to do with possessions or achievements, but has its roots in relationship, in service, even in living sacrificially for another.

There is a powerful picture imprinted in my mind from last week’s horrific school shooting in Parkland, FL. It is a picture of a woman, who had been to church that day. We know that because you can’t miss the ashen cross on her forehead. And she is reaching out to comfort another woman who was in shock and grief. She is there in the midst of chaos and hell, offering compassion and companionship. She is an icon, showing the true meaning of the cross which is first and foremost about God choosing to be in relationship with us, meeting us when everything we relied on to give us meaning and security fall apart. Standing in the shadow of the cross we discover Christ’s presence with us, and find that in our vulnerability we can, like this woman, be Christ for others.

Our nation is living in the midst of trauma that threatens to divide us. In the words of the poet, we wonder if the “center will hold”. It is a time described by David Brooks, in which we are experiencing “…decline of social trust, the breakdown of family life, the polarization of national life, the spread of tribal mentalities, the rise of narcissism, the decline of social capital, the rising alienation from institutions and the decline of citizenship and neighborliness.” Brooks concludes: “Our problems are relational.” I believe this is a time when the church’s willingness to bear the cross of Christ is of utmost importance.

When Jesus bids us take up the cross and follow him, he offers us a promise. It is not a promise that God will magically intervene and take all our problems away. It is a promise that God will equip us to live by his word of life in a world ruled by fear, and will companion us in the midst of danger. It is a promise that as we choose to follow Jesus’ way of suffering love, we will find it to be the way to an ever deeper, life-giving relationship with God and one another. We will experience the joy of the Risen Christ whose love overcomes our fears, binds up the wounds of our broken world, and gives us peace.