

Text: Mark 8:27-9:1
Title: Resisting Suffering
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For: Community CRC, Kitchener
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Back when I was in youth group, one of the big annual events was 30 Hour Famine. A fundraising program for World Vision to raise awareness of world hunger.

We'd have an all nighter at the church building go without food for 30 hours, play games, watch movies in the sanctuary at 2am, have fun, all in the name of experiencing what's it's like for others to go without food.

The popularity of this event has decreased in the 2 decades since I was in high school mainly because of criticism that it pretends suffering.

A bunch of well-off kids pretend to go without and walk away from the event feeling like we'd accomplished something. Or endured some kind of hardship. We had fun, raised some money for a good organization, and our lives didn't change much. At all. Well-intended but not particularly helpful or transformative.

We wanted to help out suffering people...by pretending to experience their suffering.

This portion of Mark is too rich for one Sunday sermon. Probably too rich for a whole year of sermons, but this week I was struck by the relationship and resistance to suffering played out here. Between Peter and Jesus. Jesus and his disciples. Jesus and us.

At the heart of this passage are two central questions:

Who is Jesus?
And what does it mean to follow him?

When Jesus asks them outright: "Who do you say I am?" Peter gets the first question right. Peter makes a public profession of faith right there and then:

"You are the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ."

Peter gets it. Until he doesn't. Because when Jesus begins to unpack exactly what that means for him - suffering, betrayal, death - Peter pulls Jesus aside to school him on just what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah, the Anointed One. And according to Peter, the Messiah does not suffer.

Behind the images of Messiah and Son of Man, that Jesus uses to describe himself, is an image from the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Daniel specifically, that points to the Son of Man, the Anointed One of God, who would come to rescue God's righteous people from oppression and suffering.

The prophet Daniel describes this figure in a vision he had:

I looked up, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven... He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

And for Peter this is who Jesus is. This is who Peter needs Jesus to be. The Son of Man was for God's suffering people. But the Son of Man did not suffer himself. His power, his authority, his might, was all so that he could save others from suffering.

Peter resists the idea of suffering as being part of the answers to the central questions of his passage: Who is Jesus? and What does it mean to follow him?

And we can hardly blame him. We do the same thing.

If we were to have a pop quiz right now and the only 2 questions on it were "Who is Jesus?" and "What does it mean to follow him?" I'd wager that while we would include the cross and suffering in our description of Jesus, we probably wouldn't be so quick to include it in our answer to the second question.

If we're honest, our functional theology of suffering can boil down to:

Jesus suffered on the cross, so we don't have to.

We may not resist the Suffering Messiah like Peter, but we sure do when it comes to our own suffering.

But Jesus places suffering at the heart of his answer to both these questions of faith and discipleship.

Who is Jesus? The Son of Man who suffers many things and is rejected, killed, and rises again after three days.

What does it mean to follow him? Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Daniel's Son of Man descended from heaven on clouds with power and might to save his people from their current suffering under a bad king.

Jesus' Son of Man descended from heaven clothed in flesh and vulnerability and experienced the suffering of his people that he might save them - not just from their current suffering, but save them body and soul.

The Son of Man did not come to save us from suffering, but to send us deeper into it

A few years back, a small group of us from this congregation - teens and leaders - travelled to Toronto to learn about urban ministry here in Canada.

Rather than being the well-off kids who go to help out the poor street folks and pretend to experience the suffering of others, we were immersed in an intense and eye-opening and heart-breaking week of learning about all the ways folks find themselves homeless and on the street.

We heard stories of addiction and sex trafficking.

We heard from kids kicked out of their home because they came out to their families and were no longer welcome.

We sat with people as they shared their struggles with their mental health and the deep trauma of their life.

We were invited to listen deeply to the suffering of others. But we were also witnesses to the work of those who have followed Jesus into the streets of Toronto to deny themselves, to take up their cross, and bear the weight of the suffering of others.

A good portion of our time was spent in a tiny storefront in Parkdale where brown cloaked Franciscan monks serve up delicious meals and conversation with the chronically homeless, the sex workers, the addicted, and the hurting who pass through their doors. There were the regulars known by name and new folks every day.

The monks would pray for and laugh with and fill the empty bellies of all those who took a seat at one of their tables. I have never seen a better image of the Lord's Supper than there.

We left with no illusion of saving anyone, of being Jesus-like Saviours. Rather we left knowing the cost of bearing with the suffering of others. How hard it is. How needed. How costly. And how deeply good.

One of the Dive Into Doctrine groups captured this in their report. In response to the questions - "What are the main issues for us as a congregation? What needs to be done to move forward?" - Group 3 offered this as a guiding principle:

Compassion means we suffer with each other and walk with one another in grace....Community means we can't let someone suffer alone or see it as their own problem.

Right now it is so easy to be overwhelmed by the needs and suffering around us.

News and social media keep us focused on the news of the moment. Just long enough for us to feel bad and for many of us to change our social media profile pics to include a temporary banner or weigh in with our own opinion, but often not long enough to move to action. We don't make the move from an issue to talk about to a real person suffering.

This is a recipe for pretending to experience the suffering of others, while never actually having to do the hard work of walking alongside someone suffering.

So, as a disciple of Jesus, called to take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow him, where is Jesus leading you?

What breaks your heart in the world around you?

Who is Jesus pointing out to you in your everyday life? Nudging you toward to ensure that they do not suffer alone?

On a day like today. A day of baptisms and profession of faith, we hope Joey and Tyler and Charlie grow up into followers of Jesus who do not turn away from the suffering of others, but are drawn to be with others in their suffering. Children of God who grow up to deny themselves, take up his cross, and follow Jesus.

And for Trevor and Natasha, for Sarah and Paul, for Chris and Michelle, we pray for strength for them as they raise up their children to know the deep love of Jesus that calls us deeper into the suffering of the world rather than running from it.

In baptism, we are drawn into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Into the way of the cross. And this wet sign of relationship and love and God's promises, assures us that the way of the cross does end in death and suffering.

Because the Son of Man did not turn from our suffering,
because Jesus refused to resist suffering,
refused to simply pretend to experience our suffering and the suffering of the world,
life has the last word.

For the way of the cross gives way to the empty tomb. And gives us hope. For ourselves. For others. For our world.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it,
but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Thanks be to God.