Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA V7, 2B5
2 Lent (Year B) 11:00 a.m. Online Worship
Sunday 28 February 2021 Recorded (2/25/21)

A Life that Matters
“For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life” (Mk. 8)?

In the 1970’s Werner Erhard (1935-) gave controversial seminars around the Bay Area as part of the Human Potential Movement. He pointed out how difficult it is to really change your life. He offered strategies that might help. Erhard believed that any form of personal transformation begins with language, with the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.¹

These often-unconscious pictures shape, what Erhard calls, “the way the world shows up for us.” They are the contexts that determine our actions. Nothing in our life will change until we can begin to question these basic assumptions about ourselves.

Erhard offers a hopeful message. We can change our relationship to our own past so that it no longer controls the future. We do this by dedicating ourselves to what Erhard calls a “possibility.” He defines a “possibility” as a guiding goal for what we hope to accomplish every time we show up. Whenever you enter a room you bring that possibility, that goal for transformation, with you.

For me, that “possibility” is the peace of Christ, the recognition that all people are God’s children and that the world is God’s beloved creation. This is the gospel, the good news of Jesus.²

The Anglican theologian Donald Allchin sums up the human condition in these words. “We seek what is beyond us, but our desire remains baffled. We are thrown back on ourselves by the enigmas of sin and suffering, of frustration and death. Of ourselves we cannot attain the goal for which we long. It is only when another comes out from the unknown world of eternity to meet us, and opens to us the way through, that we can find the fulfillment of the desire which we know within ourselves. In Christ, God, Godself comes out to meet us and becomes the way which leads into the Kingdom of Heaven.”³

Jesus meets us this morning in today’s gospel. I have spoken many times about the urgency in the Gospel of Mark. Perhaps we feel this because as Jesus’ public ministry
unfolds we see it leading so clearly to his death on the cross. The German theologian Martin Kähler calls it, “a passion narrative with an extended introduction.”

In Mark, Jesus predicts the manner of his death three times. In today’s gospel he teaches the disciples that, “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk. 8).

A chapter later in Mark 9:31 Jesus says, “The Son of man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” Then, yet again in Mark 10 Jesus exclaims, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again” (Mk. 10:32-34).

But this horrible prediction is not all that these passages share in common. In each case, as the story unfolds, Jesus’ friends are completely incapable of hearing him. We have all had this experience in our life. We have all been misunderstood. We have felt unable to accept a difficult truth. But in these stories the confusion seems extreme.

Immediately after Jesus’ prediction in chapter 9 the disciples argue about which of them is the greatest. Jesus’ prediction in chapter 10 leads James and John to ironically ask Jesus to give them special seats of honor when he comes “into glory.” Although James and John do not realize it, the reader knows that these disciples have inadvertently asked to be crucified with him.

All this brings us back to today’s gospel. After Jesus explains what will happen to him, Peter takes him aside and rebukes him. Jesus responds saying, “Get behind me Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” The Greek is a bit more ambiguous than this. Jesus is emphatically saying to Peter something more like by proposing ideas for avoiding the cross you are not following me.4

At the very center of the Gospel of Mark lies a powerful idea. It is that there are two opposing views at war in every level from within our own individual consciousness to the scale of the whole culture or society, perhaps even all history.

According to one perspective, might makes right, the only thing that matters is having power over others. That power could be money, political influence, intelligence or personal beauty or God’s backing in defeating your enemies. The Christian nationalists who overran the Capitol building exemplify this view. They seem to believe that they are
God’s army. That they are authorized to use force to make this a Christian nation. But they are not at all the only ones to regard the world in this way. Secular and religious people easily fall into this view power as the only thing worth having. Many people believe that this is simply the way the world works – dog eat dog, money talks, etc.

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus opposes this view with another picture of human flourishing. He shows how God acts outside the official structures of the high priests and their temple. In opposition to the ideal of a self which receives value by having power over others, he asserts that real greatness involves serving others. He says whoever is greatest will be servant of all.

Within us lie two potential selves – one that seeks to exercise power over others and one that gives this power away. This explains the mystery behind Jesus’ statement, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mk. 8). In this case the Greek word we translate as life is psyche, it is connected to our modern word for psychology and means soul.

Each of these two expressions of our soul is unavoidably at odds with the other. It is a zero sum game, as one lives the other one must die. With every action and every thought we implicitly choose power, or we choose love.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes that the essence of Nazism was not so much anti-Semitism but the belief that the strong should rule over the weak. Nazism was about the lust for power. Tutu also points out a truth that I frequently mention in pre-marriage counseling. He says love is not a feeling. Love is an action that we choose when we decide to steadfastly care for others. It is acting lovingly that gives rise to the feeling that we associate with love. Instead of evaluating your relationships on the basis of nebulous feelings, we need to focus our attention on what we are actually doing.

My old teacher Cornel West used to be fond of saying that, “tenderness is what love feels like in private. Justice is what love looks like in public.”

What does it look like when a person radically devotes herself to love? It looks like the death of that self which seeks control over others. It looks like taking up the cross. Why do we follow Jesus even when it sometimes means taking up suffering and the cross? Jesus tells people the truth about themselves. He dedicated his life to forgiveness and healing. He unites us to God, the one who perfectly loves us for all time. He draws us into the church which carries us through our darkness. Jesus gives us purpose so that we can live a life that matters.
A few years ago a man armed with an AK-47 and 500 rounds of ammunition entered a school full of elementary age schoolchildren in Decatur, Georgia. Fortunately for everyone involved he took Antoinette Tuff the school’s bookkeeper hostage. Although she is a middle-aged African-American and he threatened her life, she spoke to the young white gunman as if he were a member of her own family. She called him “baby” and told him she loved him.¹

She promised that if he put down his guns she would stay with him until the police arrived and that he would not be hurt. Ultimately that is exactly what happened. It is all recorded on the 911 tape and you can listen to it on the Internet. At the end she told the operator, “I’ve never been so scared in all the days of my life.”

Something in Antoinette Tuff made it possible for her to overcome her fear, to reach across all the boundaries that separated her from that young man and to form a connection. She knew something about suffering herself and told him how human it is to feel like you’ve reached the end of your rope.

But Antoinette Tuff also had something going for her. She had her faith. In church her minister had taught the congregation to “pray on the inside,” and how to “anchor” yourself in God no matter what happens around you. So that is precisely what she did.

As everyone around her viewed the gunman as nothing more than a threat she could somehow and miraculously see him as a struggling child of God. And this helped her to offer him a chance to recognize what he had in common with everyone else in that building. She brought with her a new possibility that seemed unimaginable to others.

I began this morning with Werner Erhard’s observation that in order to really change our lives we need a new story, a new possibility that can create a future that is different than anything we experienced in the past. I talked about that desire for what is beyond us and about how Jesus reaches out to help. We considered the way the Gospel of Mark reveals two opposing voices moving us to depend either on power or love. We remembered that love is an action and not just a feeling. All of this shows how an ordinary person like Antoinette Tuff can be empowered by God’s spirit to true heroism.

What will you bring into being through God’s abiding grace? What is your possibility?

¹ Therapy, a major life crisis like a divorce or career change, going back to school are ways that people try to transform their lives. These too often involve changing our context or story. I’m using a summary of Erhard from the following book. Peter Block, Community: The Structure of Belonging (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), 14-17.
Yesterday we celebrated the twenty-sixth anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. At that point of departure so long ago, I lost one life and gained a whole new one. I started to live into a new possibility. This week Heidi broke out old picture albums filled with images from those days, of lay people and clergy who hugely influenced the course of my life. I do not know if I realized this at the time but ordination is all about the future. At its heart it involves creating a new possibility that is altogether different than what the past seems to imply. This happens both for a particular individual and all of creation.


4 Herman Waetjen says a more accurate translation would be, "get away from behind me, Satan." The word used for how Jesus instructed his disciples and the one that describes how Peter talks to Jesus is arxo which means ruling over. There is a parallel between the "get behind me" and when Jesus says "take up your cross and follow me." These last two observations are not from Herman Waetjen. Herman C. Waetjen, *A Re-Ordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark’s Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014 originally published in 1989) 145-7.

5 It is actually quite common to completely misunderstand the way of Jesus. I don’t mean being slightly off in one direction or the other. I’m talking about missing the point entirely.


7 http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/zeukt7/cornel-west