

Losing Your Life (Mark 8:27-38)

On August 28th, 1955, a young African American man from Chicago named Emmett Till was visiting relatives in Mississippi when he was dragged from the house of his great-uncle taken by two white men, torturing him before shooting him and dumping him in the Tallahatchie River.

His crime?

He was falsely accused of whistling at a white woman in a general store—the wife of one of the men who ultimately lynched him.

A horrific, if all too common, story in the South during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. So, while I want to be honest, I also want to be sensitive because people still carry the wounds.

At the time, these sorts of violent crimes against African Americans were a common way of warning Black people to “stay in their place,” and therefore, didn’t usually receive much media attention. Indeed, the silence of White churches at the time sent up its own Bat signal to Black people that they couldn’t even count on their White siblings in Christ—a sin for which the church has not, in my estimation, sufficiently confessed or atoned.

No question that the murder of Emmett Till might have gone unnoticed except by those closest to the crime if it weren’t for his mother. Mamie Till Bradley made the decision to have an open casket. The decision was controversial because those who murdered young Emmett Till rendered his body unrecognizable. But Mamie Till Bradley later said, “There was just no way I could describe what was in that box. No way. And I just wanted the world to see.”

Tens of thousands of people, mostly Black, gathered at A.A. Rayner Funeral Home in Chicago to pay their respects and

witness the racist brutality against a young Black man. The crime was terrifying and affected **all** Black people. Mamie Till let *Jet* magazine photograph her son's body. The photographs were subsequently published in *Jet* magazine and the Black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*. A picture of Mamie Till Bradley hovering over the body of her son was later published in *Time* magazine.

The photos in *The Chicago Defender* ignited fury among the city's Black population. *Jet* and *Time* magazine's decision to publish the pictures gave the rest of the country a rare glimpse of the unspoken horror and savagery suffered by Black people.

Emmett Till's murder and the public nature of his funeral sparked the Civil Rights movement. This movement gave us titans of justice such as Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers, Fanny Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, John Lewis, Diane Nash, and Martin Luther King Jr., which led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Funerals with open caskets are fairly common. I've participated in funerals where, despite the condition of the body and the counsel of the funeral director, people have insisted on open caskets, even though others have thought it unwise.

But Emmett Till's open-casket funeral wasn't ***just*** a ceremony.

Because of the social climate at the time—marked by the ever-present resentments of hundreds of years of exploitation and abuse of Black people—that act meant inestimably more. It carried a symbolic meaning that launched a revolution.

Mamie Till knew: Some acts aren't just acts; they have much more significant meaning. Her words, "I just wanted the world to see," were an act of faith that if the world were just confronted with the truth of its sin, it would finally have to acknowledge the truth.

Her decision to display her son's body, to tell the truth about how the world treats the vulnerable and the oppressed, would subject her to the glaring spotlight of public attention and the focused hatred of much of the rest of White America. It cost her the life she had by picking up a cross ***no one*** wants.

Mamie Till knew all that, knew it could cost her everything ... but she decided to lay down that easy life of silence, to lose her life of quiet anonymity so the world would finally see its offense against those it chose for so long to keep conveniently hidden.

I believe Jesus, in our passage, would understand her decision. In the first eight chapters, Mark places Jesus in various strange locations, among strange people—and that, in itself, makes a theological statement about the reign of God—which always seems to be found in the back alleys and dive bars where the respectable people rarely go—which is to say, where any ***sensible*** person would least expect it.

The next eight chapters find Jesus eventually arriving in Jerusalem, a not-so-strange place populated by the powerful and influential.

The contrasts are fascinating: Jesus spends the first part of Mark's Gospel in Nebraska and then takes a fateful journey to Washington, D.C. Our text for today stands as the threshold—the point at which, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus makes the first move on his journey to Jerusalem. He's been here; now he's going there.

Of course, we've read the final chapter, so we know what happens when Jesus **gets** to Jerusalem—as did Mark's readers. So, it's difficult to read our text for today without a sense of foreboding.

We know what it will ultimately cost Jesus as he makes this final prescient speech. So we cover this challenging passage again because somewhere at the center of it all is what we confess about who Jesus is and who **we** are now because of him.

Our Gospel this morning looms as a constant reminder of what is at stake for all of us in our faith. The cross stands at the end of this journey for Jesus; and it is the cross Jesus commands his disciples to take up.

According to Mark, Jesus knew, as he walked down the narrow path that day, that there was no way for him to be faithful to God's purposes and avoid that cross. He knew that his challenge of the powerful on behalf of the powerless couldn't help but appear threatening to the ruling authorities. He knew the special kind of death reserved for Messiahs, for those who would presume to challenge Caesar.

Jesus isn't talking about some subjective experience, some inconvenience, like being near-sighted or having an uncle who's an overbearing loudmouth nobody wants to sit next to at Thanksgiving dinner. The cross is something we decide to bear, something we take up, not some physical infirmity, our aches and pains. This is a voluntary thing, not something thrust upon us by

genetics, lack of aptitude, or just sheer bad luck—things over which we have no control.

The crosses we bear, like Jesus before us, have to do with the consequences we suffer in our determination not to stay silent in the face of injustice, with the pain and suffering we embrace as those who try to live like Jesus by saying “yes” to the vulnerable and the exploited while saying “no” to those who operate the machinery of the death-dealing systems of domination.

But, as James Cone argues, “We cannot find liberating joy in the cross by spiritualizing it, by taking away its message of justice in the midst of powerlessness, suffering, and death. The cross as a locus of divine revelation is not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the way things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power” (*The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Kindle ed.).

According to James Neyrey, "Crucifixion was an institution of humiliation, torture, and execution designed to deal with the people considered most threatening to the establishment and its interests."

That is, as Richard Horsley points out: "Insofar as crucifixion was the form of execution that the Romans used on recalcitrant slaves or political agitators in the provinces, Jesus must have been executed because he was at least thought to be a rebel against the Roman imperial order. That is, he was executed as a political actor."

In other words, the cross was something people got nailed to as a form of capital punishment for being political subversives—not a handy piece of jewelry, perfect for accessorizing a smart evening dress.

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Christianity won its biggest P.R. battle by convincing people that moral good consists of things like

kindness, piety, and humility, which he identifies as the last refuge of the impotent (*The Genealogy of Morals*, 180). The perfect symbol for this morality of the weak, Nietzsche believed, is the cross, which he says has a “debilitating narcotic power” with its “ghastly paradox of a crucified God.” In the cross, he lamented, is the certainty that the pacifism of Jesus “has by now triumphed over all other, nobler values” (169).

Nietzsche saw that the power of Christianity didn’t come from claiming power ... or by trying to **be** the boss by **deposing** the boss. Instead, he understood that following Jesus is about the vulnerability of serving the vulnerable, the highest demonstration of which comes in the cross.

More accurately than many Christians, Nietzsche recognized that at the very heart of Christianity sits the cross—a preference for what appears to the world as weakness: peace over violence, gentleness over cruelty, welcome over exclusion, love over hatred.

Where Nietzsche and I disagree isn't over whether this is **true** but whether this vulnerability is a **good** thing.

Followers of Jesus think the vulnerability of serving the vulnerable is what makes us more human—not less.

But Nietzsche's right. The cross has been seen throughout history not as an invitation to an adventure but as a domesticated symbol of stability—an ode to resignation and acquiescence. But it's possible that in domesticating the cross, we no longer sense its offensiveness ... **or** its glory.

In today's text, Jesus not only says he's walking toward the cross but also invites us to go with him. He promises us that where the crucified are, there he will also be.

If we're following Jesus, we're walking **toward** the cross. But we're not walking the path of the cross alone. The call is to take

up our crosses and **follow** Jesus ... **with** Jesus. He's already walked down that road toward the cross, but he walks it again and again whenever the faithful bear their crosses—challenging the oppressor on behalf of the oppressed. Having borne it **before** us, he's able to bear it **with** us.

Is today's text about the cross good news or bad?

It sounds like bad news—the worst of all possible news—in a society where pain and sacrifice are avoided and denied at all costs.

The cross disabuses us of the simplistic notion that the meaning of life revolves around pleasure, around getting my needs met the way I think they need to be met.

But what if the cross, with all the **bad** news of suffering and sacrifice, is also good news?

What if our decision to lay down our lives and take up the cross, as fearsome and terrifying as it is, is the place where we meet Jesus?

Moreover, being near Jesus puts us near the vulnerable and the exploited, the powerless. That's **good** news. Since we've embraced the cross, we've already embraced powerlessness, not as a **strategy** for effective living but as a way of **life** that seeks only to follow Jesus wherever he goes.

We no longer have to wonder whether we have any responsibility for our brothers and sisters, those who can't stand up any longer by themselves.

We no longer need to ask whether those who've been forgotten, abused, or kicked to the curb are our people.

Through the grace of the cross, we're able to see not competitors in the food chain, not threats to our individual projects, not

nuisances for which we have neither the time nor the energy, but family ... family everywhere we look.

Athol Gill points out, "One of the profound paradoxes of Christianity is to be found in the fact that the one who was not able to carry his own cross (15:21) is the one who enables us to carry ours."

The cross isn't optional equipment for the journey of faith, but we don't have to bear it alone.

As Father Daniel Berrigan once famously pointed out, "If you want to follow Jesus, you'd better look good on wood."

Jesus knew. Mamie Till knew.

There are some things worth losing your life for.

— Amen