

Ashamed?

Mark 8:31-38

March 8, 2009

I have a recording of an interview done with Sara Groves, the singer/songwriter whose song was used in the video shown earlier in this service. In that interview, she talked about the song, "What I Thought Wanted," and about the time in her life out of which that song came, about all the things she thought she wanted. She talked about wanting to be safe, wanting a guarantee that she and her children would always be safe, that nothing bad would happen to them as long as they were serving the Lord.

She spoke of a time when those worries and doubts were weighing especially heavily on her. She was riding on a bus with a friend, probably on tour or en route to a performance or a recording session, and she told her friend: "If something were to happen to Kirby [Sara's son] while I was out doing what I believe is God's call in my life, I don't know if my faith would survive that." Her friend responded: "If your faith won't survive that, your faith isn't surviving!"

Sara acknowledged the wisdom of her friend's counsel and continued: "If you can create a scenario where God is not God, then God is not God right now ... The world is not a safe place, but God's pursuit of me is the safest place I can be, and God's kingdom is the only thing that won't wash away!"

*What I thought I wanted, what I got instead,
leaves me broken ... and grateful.*

*You call us into your church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be your servants in the service of others,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world
and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.*

To join him in his passion and victory. Not to gather with other disciples to learn from him ... and then go your own way. Not to admire him and sing his praises, praise his wisdom and his compassion and his selfless sacrifice ... and then go your own way. Not to reap the benefits of all he has done for you, all he has given you -- forgiveness and healing and comfort and insight and courage ... and then go your own way!

You are called into the church to join him! ... to join him in his passion and victory.

We will join Christ Jesus in his victory. That is God's promise, the promise that is the foundation of our faith. Because of Christ's victory, we live toward life, not toward death. We live toward peace, not toward chaos. We live toward reconciliation, not toward hostility. We live toward joy, not toward grief.

But first, we join him in his passion. Look at our Lenten banner: the path receding into the distance, and at the head of the path -- a cross. The cross stands at the head of the path! You cannot take the path without going through the cross. The cross is the way.

If any of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, take up your cross, and follow me ...

What does it mean to take up your cross? What does it mean to join Christ in his passion?

It means there will be suffering. For Jesus and his followers, suffering is not merely unfortunate. It is a way. It is the way. Jesus and his followers literally put their bodies on the line, put their bodies in the way, willingly suffering pain and persecution to resist evil and to bring the good news of justice and peace and reconciliation to ... well, to you, and to people like you ... and to people very unlike you.

It means there will be sacrifice. For Jesus and his followers, sacrifice is more than paying your dues, more than a necessary means to desired end. Sacrifice is a way of life. It is an offering of the best, the very best -- your self -- to God.

It means going another way, choosing another way, living another way, a way very different from the ways of common wisdom and human tradition. It is a way that will seem to scoffers foolish and preposterous and dangerous and weak, but a way that to believers is the one way that leads to life, a way they pursue with unflagging determination, not merely for their own sake, but for the sake of the scoffers, too! It means embracing that way gladly, without bitterness and without shame.

If you are ashamed of me and my teaching in this godless and wicked day, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes ...

Who would be ashamed of Jesus and his teaching?

Peter would. Peter scolded Jesus for talking about the suffering and rejection and eventual execution that lay ahead for him, that lay ahead in the path that Jesus would choose to follow. Peter was ashamed and embarrassed by that kind of talk, by that kind of way. You can imagine his words of protest: "We have given up everything to come with you and this is what you are going to leave us with? Failure? Rejection? Defeat? Death? Is God on your side or not? Is God on our side or not?"

Peter would ... and we would. So much of the contemporary Christian proclamation of the gospel seems to be about salvation without suffering, about finding a way to the good life without sacrifice, about victory without passion. Sometimes the Christian gospel seems indistinguishable from the maxims and methods of the myriad of self-help gurus we are so eager to make rich. And sometimes proclaiming the gospel in our day is about getting rich, too.

"Believe and you will be happy!" "Believe and you will live a victorious and trouble-free life!" "Believe and reap the blessings God that has in store for you and your loved ones!" "Believe and leave your worries and burdens behind."

We seek a faith that will make us more content, more at ease, more secure, a faith that is unthreatened and unthreatening. And we are ashamed and embarrassed by a faith that is too different, too counter-cultural, too risky, too "out there," a faith that rubs elbows too much with society's underside, a faith that asks too much of us or asks us to abandon too much of what we have set our hearts on.

We want a faith that will help us do well and prosper and fit in, a faith that will make us better citizens of this world. Which is surely on its way to hell!

Now you have to understand that it is hard for me to talk about this. It hits too close to home. I think of all the things I want, all the many things I thought I wanted!

All the things that are indeed God's gifts to me. All the things that are indeed God's good gifts to all of us! But these things are not the gift and can never take the place of the gift and these things quickly turn to dust if we seek them first.

It is easy for me too to choose the way of what I might call “respectable Christianity” instead of the way of faithful servanthood, instead of joining Jesus in his passion. I want to be respected, to be liked, to be appreciated, to be commended. I want to fit in.

We want the respect and admiration of our neighbors, of the people in our community, at least of the people that “matter” in our community. We want a big church, a successful church, a growing church, a church we can be proud of.

But think for a moment of those we might call saints, men and women who seemed to take following Jesus seriously, men and women who were willing to join Christ in his passion, people like Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa or Francis of Assisi or Nelson Mandela or Albert Schweitzer or Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Did they fit in? Did they lead comfortable lives? Did they find success? Did they enjoy the praise and respect of their peers? Did they enjoy lives unmarked by pain or hardship or loss?

But these are people just like us, just like us. They simply heard the call to follow Jesus ... and did. They were not ashamed of Jesus' way, but gladly chose to join him in his passion ... and victory!

What about you? Will you follow Jesus? Will you take his path? Will you put your trust not in the God of the good times, the God of guarantees, the God of always answered prayers, but the living God that meets you and walks with you through this life as it is, with all its doubts and difficulties and disappointments, with all its dangers, toils and snares? Will you be faithful, all the way, to the end?

Will you be broken ... and faithful?

Broken ... and grateful?

Broken ... and peaceful?

Will you join Christ in his passion, so that you may join him in his victory?