

COVENANT AND COMMITMENT

MARK 8:31-38; GENESIS 17: 1-7, 15-16; ROMANS 4: 13-25

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University Church of Chicago

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Don McCullough, an Episcopal priest who is president of San Francisco Theological Seminary, tells of a Sunday morning when he learned what liturgical dancers wear under their leotards. Seems that a young woman in his congregation had given a very inspiring interpretation of the psalm as it was read in the liturgy of the 8:30 AM worship service, then had left the sanctuary and had gone to the church's cry room to change her clothes. Just as Dr. McCullough began his sermon, she turned on the lights in the unoccupied cry room, which was located in the church's balcony, to change from her tights into street clothes.

The side of the cry room window facing the choir was mirrored, so the dancer assumed that the choir would not be able to see her change clothes. What she didn't know was that when one turned on the lights in the choir room, the choir could then see behind the mirrored glass. It was impossible to keep his mind on the sermon text before him as the young woman disrobed, Dr. McCullough says, and the men in the choir thought they had gone to heaven.

It is that kind of dichotomy that we hear in today's Gospel lection. This defining moment in Our Lord's ministry occurs in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus has been going throughout the Galilee preaching, teaching and healing. He and the Twelve come to a region in the far northern part of Israel. He confronts them: "Who do people say that I am?" (8:27). They answer, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets" (28). Then he asks them, "But who do you say that I am?"

That question is answered by Peter, "You are the Messiah."

So Jesus begins to teach—warn them, really—about what is going to happen: there will be great suffering and rejection; the chief priests and the elders and the scribes will turn on him; he will be killed and after three days rise again. Mark declares, "He said all this quite openly" (32). No parables, no metaphors, no enigma here: this is what is going to happen. Be prepared!

Whereupon Peter, the one who had the temerity to announce that Jesus was the Anointed One, the Son of the Living God, takes him aside and rebukes him. And Jesus turns and looks at his disciples—for they too are implicated, Peter did not come to this rebuke on his own—and makes a devastating reply, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (33). He links the rejection of Peter and the others with Satan's tempting and testing (1:14-15). The New American Bible and the New Jerusalem Bible translate this sentence as, "You are thinking not as God thinks, but as human beings do."

This story is astonishingly relevant for us. We, like Peter, get blinded by our own preconceptions. We cherish our convictions, our agenda for the Messiah. I hate to tell you this, but there are people who come to worship in University Church—as in every other church—blinded by our prejudices, presuppositions and preconceptions of the way things must be. Of course, we are nice, well-mannered, genteel folks, so we would never rebuke Jesus, never with our words, never. We respond instead with benign neglect, insipid indifference.

G. A. Studdert-Kennedy's poem, "Indifference," catches this kind of rebuke:

When Jesus came to Golgotha, they hanged Him on a tree.
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary.
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns. Red were his wounds and deep.

When Jesus came to Chicago, we simply passed him by.
We never hurt a hair of him, we only let him die.
For we had grown more tender now. We would not give him pain.
We simply passed down the street and left him standing in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."
Still it rained the winter rain that drenched him through and through
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see.
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

The testimony of Peter and the Twelve has the same underlying motif that you and I experience: words of self-sufficiency and detachment yield to feelings of forsakenness and despair. As the disciples begin to follow Jesus on that inexorable journey from the Galilee to Jerusalem, they wonder, they fear. The rebuke is for them and for us a lament.

One of my dearest friends, Paul Schwab, was a psychiatrist who taught at the University of Chicago Hospital and served as a therapist with individual patients, and I were talking several years ago about self-centeredness and its many forms. In both arenas—as professor and therapist—Paul remarked that he found people who worked themselves almost to death attempting to provide that elusive "better life" for themselves and their families.

I thought Paul was going to criticize the materialism of our culture and condemn that kind of obsessive work. Although he could have, he did not. Rather he said, "Many of us have transferred our basic

selfishness from ourselves onto our spouses and our children. If we try to become successful and rich for ourselves, that is bad. But if we say we're doing it for our family, then who can criticize? But when we're helping our families, we're still helping ourselves, aren't we?"

Jesus makes clear that his disciples, too, must suffer (34-39). *Anyone* who wants to become a follower of Jesus—*anyone! Not just the original Twelve*—must first deny himself or herself and take up the cross. At its most basic level, denying oneself means removing oneself from the center of one's concerns, relinquishing status and power in favor of service to others.

This means that we take on a new identity. I am intrigued by the custom in the Roman Catholic Church of being given a name at your baptism that is different from the name you were given at your birth. For example, Flannery O'Connor, that Catholic Christian novelist from Milledgeville, Georgia, exchanged correspondence with a woman whose identity is protected in the collection of letters, *The Habit of Being*. Betty Hester was the woman's name we now know, and because of Ms. O'Connor's influence and compassion, she was baptized and confirmed as an adult into the Catholic Church, whereupon she took the name "Gertrude" as her baptismal name. (Although she later left the church and began reading the novels of Iris Murdoch, books Flannery considered "hollow.")

Thus, in today's lection from the Hebrew Bible, God renames Abram and Sarai: "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your names shall be Abraham...As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah will be her name. I will bless her..." (Gen. 17:5, 15-16). Remember how Jesus renamed Cephas and his name became Peter, the Rock? And how Jacob was renamed "Israel" by "the man" with whom he wrestled at Peniel (Gen. 32: 22-32).

The very fact that God can rename a person bespeaks the subordination of the human hero to the divine sovereign. It is a sign of the Covenant that God makes, a sure sign of grace because neither Abraham nor Jacob nor Peter nor Sarah did anything to deserve the bestowal of God's commitment to them.

Paul picks up on this theme in his letter to the Romans: "For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith...It depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace" (4: 13, 16). Faith is never something we manufacture or wish for or create. Only God can create faith, but the task of the church is to cultivate religious faith in hearts where mistrust has predominated. Our culture is marked by mistrust, isn't it? Vietnam, Watergate, political corruption, sexual harassment and abuse, church scandals—the list seems endless.

The church is a place of promise and faith. It is a fellowship in which trust must be built and cultivated. One of the church's main tasks is to teach the right relationship between faith and obedience. One problem we have is that we become so self-absorbed that we easily become self-centered, then self-righteous.

My friend, Rabbi Eleanor Smith, who also earned an M.D. degree from the University of Chicago and is a resident in oncology at Evanston Hospital, seeks to deal as both a rabbi and a doctor with the whole of

her patients' lives. She's a very astute and funny person, and she told me of taking a class in physics in which she was seated next to that nine-year-old genius who completed his college education in two years. On their first test, he pulled a score of 160 out of a possible 100!

Her professor, a renowned physicist at Fermi Lab who teaches as an adjunct instructor at Loyola, was recounting the story of a friend of his, another renowned physicist, who was walking with his fiancée on a beautiful, clear night in the western suburbs. The young woman looked up at the millions and millions of stars dancing in the skies. "How beautiful they are!" she exclaimed. The scientist turned to her and said, "And you are walking with the only man in the world who can explain to you all the scientific reasons they shine so brightly."

Eleanor, sitting near the back of the classroom, couldn't help herself. She blurted out, "And did she call off the wedding?"

When a person's ego needs are so paramount, that person is cut off from any vital existential faith, either in God or in other people. Kierkegaard identifies real faith as a double movement of giving up and getting back.

You and I are, as Luther characterized us, "forgiven sinners." We have been given God's grace in abundance. We didn't earn it. It is a gift. But the requirement God puts on us is obedience. Not just to be reasonably good people, but to be obedient enough to suffer, to take up our cross, to work for justice and love in every situation.

Barry Bailey told of a retired minister who was his mentor in Shreveport, Louisiana. Dr. Freeman led the prayer at the early worship service Sunday after Sunday. He and Barry became dear friends. Time and again they would walk out the side door into the chancel of the church. He would go first, Barry would open the door for him, and he would comment that the door seemed to get heavier and heavier. He was well into his eighties, a delightful man with a great sense of humor.

One day right before Barry and Dr. Freeman left Barry's office to go in for the worship service, he turned to Barry and said, "I want to tell you something, Barry. And I want you to remember this all your life. Never hate anybody." Barry agreed. "I mean this, Barry. I'm not saying this casually. Do not allow yourself to hate anyone. Life is too short." Again Barry said he agreed with him. And then Dr. Freeman said, "I do not hate anyone. But I do carry this list around with me so that if I ever backslide, I know where I'm going to start."

I don't think God has such a list, but if she does, I know my name is at the top of the list. Thanks be to God that we live by grace, not works.

One of my mentors in the faith was Albert Outler, a remarkable preacher, professor, writer, raconteur who taught at Southern Methodist University, Perkins School of Theology for many years. He was a man who despised cant and pretense and false piety. He was confronted in downtown Dallas (that's in Texas) one day by one of those pious evangelicals—you know the type: they think they are going to heaven and you are not. She walked up to Outler and asked, "Have you found Jesus?"

Dr. Outler quietly replied, "Oh, don't tell me you have lost him again."

In our lostness, God searches us out. We are called to new life, to take up our cross and follow.