

Turning Points
Mark 8:27-38
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Then he began to teach them 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. (Mark 8:31)

Today's passage, found smack in the middle of Mark's Gospel, tells the story of the turning point in Jesus' ministry. For the first time Jesus openly declared his intention to go to Jerusalem, not to take, but surrender power through his crucifixion.

This will be hard, but try to put yourself in the disciples' shoes. You're a Jew and since childhood you've been taught the Messiah would liberate Israel and usher in a new era of security and prosperity. There would be peace and harmony in the land, sort of like that perfect place dreamed about in those Walgreen commercials. What's more, the Gentiles would be routed and Jerusalem would become the new capital of the world. God's Kingdom would come and God's will would be done and the Jews would be on top of the heap.

When Jesus confirmed Peter's declaration, "You are the Christ," a tingle must have gone up and down their spines. Standing in his presence they realized they were his closest confidants, the fortunate chosen few... "but my ways are not your ways," God said through the prophet.

Peter and his friends were repeating the same mistake made by countless people in every generation before and since: looking for a political strong man to solve their problems.

Jesus' aim was to break that expectation. He'd be the Messiah, but on his terms. Instead of promising a new and improved world system, he'd usher in something completely different, a Kingdom not of this world.

Jesus knew a kingdom not of this world would be a hard sell. How do you rally support for an unseen entity that promises no tangible results? That was the hurdle Jesus couldn't overcome, at least not yet. So he didn't try. All he could do was remain faithful to his calling to be crucified knowing his would be a solitary journey to the cross. Of course no one, especially his closest followers, could understand why he would make such a strategic blunder. Like a cow kicking over her best pail of milk, Jesus seemed to be sabotaging his life's work. That's why Peter took him aside and tried to talk him out of this crazy scheme. Peter just didn't get it, and even though we know the rest of the story, we don't always get it either.

It's easy following a charismatic, strong man who promises you the world, but very difficult following a humble man who expects you to give up your life and die. It doesn't make sense, unless you're willing to break free from your preconceived notions.

I find it curious Jesus didn't calmly sit the disciples all down and teach simple but powerful parables to help them catch his vision to bring salvation to the world. That's

what I'd try to do, take them all out to lunch, one at a time, convincing them my way was the best way. Then I'd call a meeting and ask for a vote.

But that's exactly what Jesus didn't do. Knowing he was changing the rules in the middle of the game Jesus not only let them stew in their angst and confusion he then upped the ante. "You still want to follow me? Then forget about what you want and do what I want. I expect you to follow my example and be ready and willing to die with me."

Give them credit. Not one of them said, "I didn't sign up for this," and quit. They all stayed. Partially out of loyalty, but partly because they slipped into a state of deep denial. On one level they heard Jesus, but on a deeper level they denied the implications.

Denial is one of the normal defense mechanisms of human nature. Denial gives us time to absorb the shock of bad news, but denial becomes abnormal if it never gives way to reality.

Jesus being Jesus, he allowed for the disciples' flirtation with denial, even putting up with their pretensions of greatness and demands for position and privilege in God's Kingdom (see Mark 9:33-37 and 10:35-45). But at the same time Jesus refused to enable their self-delusion. He kept hammering away at the singular importance of consistent self-denial, cross shouldering and commitment.

"For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (Mark 8:34-36)

There are countless stories of men and women who made grave miscalculations in their pursuit of happiness. Momentarily they seem to gain the whole world, but sadly end up losing everything. The obvious ones are the rich and famous celebrated for their glittering accomplishments. But they're only the tip of the iceberg. There are lots of people, not rich and famous, but just as frustrated. Why? They either cannot or will not deny themselves, shoulder their cross and follow Jesus into his kingdom because even though they're miserable, they're not motivated enough to break free from their vicious cycle. So there they sit, wondering why they remain stuck where they don't want to be.

What's their problem? Simple. They're trying to save a way of life not worth saving. So they continue attempting to satisfy their insatiable appetites only to become more inconsolable than ever.

Someone once said you have to enter Christ's Kingdom violently. The scales just can't fall from your eyes, sometimes they have to be shot off. Why? Because even though we complain loudly about our unhappiness, we're not always willing to pay the price for freedom. Deep down we don't want to change because we either don't see the point or can't see the benefits of the life Jesus offers.

The title for today's sermon is The Turning Point. Jesus' revelation of his intentions to be crucified is the turning point in Mark's Gospel. From that point on, everything changed. He made it clear the "happy days" of his ministry were really the prelude to his passion and death.

What's the turning point in your life? What will it take for you to be turned around so you can walk with Jesus to Jerusalem despite your fears and apprehension?

Interesting point: As I said earlier, when Jesus revealed he was going to Jerusalem to die, he didn't ask for a vote and say, "All in favor say aye." Instead he changed the rules in

mid game. It was a unilateral decision. So the disciples had no say in the matter, except to decide whether to turn around and go home, or turn around and go to Jerusalem. The same is true for us. God alone makes the rules, but only you and I can choose to play by God's rules. When we make that decision, that's another turning point in our lives. Of course, making a turning point doesn't mean it's all downhill from here. Read the rest of Mark's Gospel. Too many times the disciples screwed up royally, especially on Good Friday when Jesus needed them most. But to their credit, they never quit. They were embarrassed and humbled, but they always came back, even if it was with their tail between their legs. Why? Because deep down they knew Jesus was the only way and they couldn't bear to leave him.

If you're like me, you feel the same way, plus you're amazed at God's unlimited patience. Thank God for God! He loves us that much. Even though we never quite get it God encourages us to try, try again.

How else can you explain Jesus' decision to take up his cross even though his disciples repeatedly let him down?

Albert Schweitzer was famous for being a great missionary who spent most of his adult life in Africa. Earlier in his career he was a theologian whose writings were dismissed by many in the Church for being heretical at worst and unorthodox at best. A Bible scholar wrote a paper denouncing Schweitzer's theology but not his life's work.

"Perhaps we should not judge Schweitzer for his words but by his deeds; not by his books but by his Christian discipleship; not for his theological conceptions, but for the fact he took up Christ's cross, carried it to Africa and never laid it down."

Take up your cross. Never lay it down. But if you drop it, pick it up again for Christ's sake and the sake of his gospel and you will soon realize your decision was still another important turning point in your life.