

Mark 9:38-50

This section of the Gospel of Mark is part of a group of texts that have been termed, “the hard sayings of Jesus.” Jesus certainly speaks these words to grab attention and to wake people up: you can’t hear references to the loss of limbs or eyeballs and not notice- and he does this to cause people to think long and hard about their actions and the impact and ultimate consequences of their behavior. Jesus is a truth teller, like it or not. And these kinds of hard sayings are a major reason why he got into so much trouble with the leaders and powers that be of his day. Jesus didn’t shy away from speaking the hard truth because he knew what all good parents know: sometimes the hard truth is exactly what we need to hear.

As people of faith, we are called at times to, like Jesus, speak the hard truth. I can’t tell you how many times I have been preparing for a sermon or been in the middle of a difficult conversation and felt God’s Spirit leading me to saying something I’d really rather not say... the hard truth. Sometimes the hard truth is nothing more than saying, “That hurt my feelings.” Other times it’s speaking the truth about a much deeper problem...like someone’s addiction or self-destructive behavior. And then of course there are the times I have had to hear and contend with hard truths about myself, my life situation, or my own struggles. I treasure having friends in my life who aren’t afraid to call me on things – to hold me to account. And my friends do this in a really loving way (usually). But sometimes I don’t like what they have to say. Now, I’m not talking about those so-called friends who correct your grammar – I’m talking about friends who will not only tell you when you have spinach in your teeth but will even tell you that you’re just plain wrong. That’s a real friend.

But it takes courage to speak the truth. And it especially takes courage to say the things no one wants to hear or when confronting someone in power or authority, especially when the stakes are high. It’s scary.

Right now, in our society we are in the middle of a very challenging but significant time with the #metoo movement. I’ve had people ask me to talk about it. But depending on what media program you watch or listen to, you could easily think, depending on the

bias of the particular outlet, that either every charge of misconduct or abuse is a lie – or that every charge is absolutely true. But I believe Jesus offers us a different way to be faithful in the midst of what’s happening as people of faith and the Gospels offer us several principles to follow in this challenging time.

The first principle Jesus offers is that we must, as people of faith, hold a clear commitment to the truth – whatever that truth is, no matter how hard it may be to bear. Jesus says the “truth will set you free.” Free. And so a primary commitment as people of faith is to the truth and nothing less. And when we seek and serve the truth in our own hearts and in our wider world, all of us, ALL OF US, will find healing. So, we commit ourselves to upholding the truth.

The second principle Jesus offers is a call to speak the truth – even when it is very hard. Even when it might cost us. Even when it’s embarrassing. Jesus didn’t mince words in our Gospel text today- and Jesus gives us a model of courage and perseverance as a truth teller even when it was a risk to himself. Those who have suffered due to the behavior of others can lean on God in Christ for strength and find the courage to speak out. Years ago in another state, I had to go to the Bishop to report the misconduct of a priest I worked with – I can’t tell you how afraid I was – but I can tell you that God was with me that day – and gave me the right words to say – to speak the truth, the hard truth...that I knew was my responsibility. God is with us in this. And sometimes the truth we need to speak is about ourselves: what we have or haven’t done – God’s Spirit will guide and grant us courage and wisdom.

The third principle from Jesus is the invitation to support those who have a hard truth to tell. We may need to come alongside and offer our help and encouragement to those who are suffering. When Jesus was undergoing great suffering before his arrest he asked the disciples to stay awake and pray with him. We are called as a church be that support to others in their hour of need. And I have friends on both sides of the fence that I have walked alongside - friends who needed my support to speak the truth about what they had suffered as well as friends who were falsely accused as well as those who had to come to terms with the wrongs they had committed. Our commitment to the truth is our guide, but we can

all support and help bring others to a place of healing in the midst of that suffering.

The fourth principle from Jesus is the call to ensure that those who need our protection are in fact given that protection. It is up to us. In our Gospel story today, Jesus holds a little child on his lap and says, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones...it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” This is a hard call to protect the vulnerable...and alerts us to the great responsibility we have to the vulnerable among us. The millstone was a very heavy circular stone, thousands of pounds in weight, drawn by donkeys to grind wheat. The image is a rather startling one to imagine. But not a day goes by that there isn’t some new story of child abuse or scandals in the wider church and our society involving young women or men or children who have been hurt.

My mother was an ER Nurse for many years in LA County and I remember times when she would come home after witnessing something truly tragic, particularly when it involved a child or young person. And on those days, I remember her saying, “Today I don’t need gentle and meek Jesus by my side, I need the Jesus who said “it’s better to have a millstone hung around your neck than to hurt one of these little ones!” I knew what she meant. There are times when gentle words are absolutely not enough.

The fifth principle Jesus offers is the call we are given in baptism. Jesus calls his followers into the waters of baptism -where we die to sin and selfish ambition and are raised up to a new life of love for God and our neighbor. During the baptismal service we just had we stated very clearly our role in our baptismal vows, when we promise to seek and serve Christ in every person, loving our neighbors as ourselves and to respect the dignity of every human being. Every one of them. When we fail to do this –because we all fail to do this at times - not only are we called on to confess our failings, but to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with those we have hurt. It is never too late to make amends and to start over.

This leads to the last principle Jesus offers. While we absolutely must hold people to account, and this could very well include serious consequences for their behaviors- which is necessary to the functioning

of society, the goal at a more personal and spiritual level, in order to find peace, is the call to forgive. But let’s be clear: forgiveness is not a forgetting or an excusing or ignoring of what was done to us or our loved ones but a release of what has happened into God’s hands, a letting go, in order to find freedom within. Dr. Edith Eger (who we will be hearing from at our luncheon later today) knows what it means to live a life of forgiveness after surviving the horrors of Auschwitz. She describes the need to rage first and then move on to forgiveness – because, she says, forgiveness is a gift you give yourself, and it’s not something we can do prematurely. She writes: “To forgive is to grieve—for what happened, for what didn’t happen—and to give up the need for a different past.” And, “When we seek revenge, even non-violent revenge, we are revolving, not evolving.” So, we don’t forget or excuse, justice is essential. We forgive and let go of the hold things have on us because that is the key to healing and freedom in our own hearts. We may have to ask God to help us many times. And sometimes the person we have to forgive most desperately is ourselves. We may suffer guilt over not having spoken out about our own suffering, about remaining silent when someone else has suffered, or even because we are guilty of hurting someone. But forgiveness is always there for us and is always possible with God’s help.

Yes, we are living in a challenging time. But we have an incredible example in Jesus. So, fear not – fear not – because the truth will set us, ALL OF US, every one of us, free.

Amen.