

Mark 8:31-38

Who are your heroes? Who do you really look up to and want to emulate? My seven year old son is clear – Spider Man and Black Panther are on the top of his hero list. I tend to appreciate the unlikely or flawed heroes who must struggle against the odds -fictional characters like Frodo Baggins and Harry Potter. In real life it's harder to find heroes – even the people we hold in high esteem are often so deeply flawed that it's hard to get past it. As a young girl I idealized missionaries – they seemed like heroes to me – going off to other countries to serve God – and then I went to serve and live with a family of missionaries overseas for a year and realized they were just like everyone else with problems and character flaws of their own. I also used to idolize pastors and priests – but that went away when I got to seminary! The truth is, we're all just people – there is no one person who will never fail us or disappoint us in some way. So who can we look up to and emulate in this life? Who can inspire us by their witness? Who are the true heroes? Because we need to be inspired and encouraged to do what and to be who God has called us to be. So the question becomes: what does that look like?

Jesus is a hero whose witness never fails...but the example and calling of Jesus is not always an easy one to follow. Even Jesus' disciples struggled with it as Jesus began to tell the disciples that he was going to suffer and be crucified and killed. Peter is scandalized by this – that does not fit his definition of success or heroism- and that is certainly not the way of power or empire –the way of the world - and so Peter rebukes Jesus, rejecting this path. Peter, like most of us, wants to form his hero into his own image and his own definition of heroism and success by the world's standards ...and it doesn't include laying down one's life in this sacrificial way. But when Peter does this Jesus responds with those famous, strong words, "Get behind me Satan!" You see – the way of the world – the way of empire and its standards of success and heroism – which usually includes violence- is

opposed to God's way. Being a hero in God's Kingdom is very different.

And Jesus makes it very clear that his path – the call of God on those who would follow him - involves denying oneself, taking up one's cross, and following him. Those that want to save their lives will lose them, he says, and those who lose their lives for his sake, will save them. And then Jesus asks this very powerful question: "What will it profit you to gain the whole world and yet forfeit your life?" In Matthew this verse is translated as "soul." What does it profit you to gain everything the world offers – when it will result in the loss of your deepest self- the loss of your very soul?" You see the world promises us much – the way of the world is a seeking after power and success which is inevitably gained by dominating others – it turns out that it is a success through oppression. In fact, many of the traditional "heroes" in our culture are heroes that defeat others through this kind of superiority, oppression and show of strength.

And it is idolizing such heroes and such forms of success that leads to the broken systems of white supremacy and the oppression of other people groups for the benefit of those with power and privilege. This past week the SD Union Tribune ran an article exposing the fact that in San Diego, the rate of suspension for young black students – from kindergarten through third grade is more than double that of white students. And the disparity in these rates just increased with age. Meanwhile the news has been filled with stories of hate crimes against Asian Americans during the pandemic. In fact, one of our own parishioner's relatives, who was born in the US, was recently verbally accosted while on a walk – and told to go back to her own country and to stop spreading the virus right here in San Diego. The way of the world – through a sense of superiority, domination, and ultimately violence and hatred – is exactly what Jesus is rebuking when he says, "Get behind me Satan." Mohandas Gandhi studied the Gospels and understood this teaching of Jesus and the path of nonviolence very well. If you've seen the opening of the movie Gandhi, in it he tries to explain this

approach to victory through nonviolence and says this, "I am asking you to fight. To fight against their anger, not to provoke it. We will not strike a blow. But we will receive them. And through our pain we will make them see their injustice. And it will hurt, as all fighting hurts. But we cannot lose. We cannot. They may torture my body, break my bones, even kill me. Then, they have my dead body. Not my obedience."

You see the way of the world invokes the call to fight and take up power, domination, and arms against others to achieve one's ends. The world says, "Take up your sword" while Jesus says, "Take up your cross." Success and victory are not through violence and power – the battle is won through the power of sacrificial love. It is the path of humility and servanthood – not pride and domination.

So I sometimes wonder – do those who claim to be followers of Jesus understand the call Jesus has made to his followers? Do I understand it? My own knee jerk reaction is a lot like Peter's - Jesus' words make me uncomfortable and I too want to prove myself and my worth when I have been wronged....the impulse is to fight -but not with humility and love. And so I, we, have to step back and ask what is our goal – who are we trying to be – who is it we emulating? And what is the ultimate goal of our lives? If the goal is short term success by the world's standards- to gain the world and all it offers- then there are plenty of "heroes" to show us that way. And it so shortsighted. But if the goal is the divine plan for our lives - the road less traveled, the way of Jesus –then we must be willing to forfeit the gains of this world in order to save our selves and very souls into eternity. Because...what does it profit me or profit you to gain the whole world but forfeit our souls? The answer is – of course- nothing. Nothing.

CS Lewis summarized the concept this way: "Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither."

This path of sacrifice, self-denial and love is a path of heroism that has been trod by others – but they are fewer and farther between. And most of them are not featured in films or by the media – or anywhere else. But they are featured as saints of God, known to God, and have left this world better than the way they found it.

This Lent – we are invited to once again, lay down our swords and our definitions and visions of success according to this world – and become heroes of faith – heroes that take up our cross and follow Jesus...and in doing so gain so much more than this world could ever offer us. Amen.