

Sermon for February 25, 2018 (Lent2B) “Living In The Open”
(Based on Romans 4:13-24, Mark 1:40-45, & Mark 8:31-38)

“I’m only going to say this once, so listen up.” Did you hear that, from a parent, or a teacher, or your CO? And when you heard it, maybe you knew—it was serious business, time to stop messing around, time to stop pushing your own agenda, because this person central to your life suddenly needed you to listen.

Through most of Mark's gospel, Jesus is trying to hush the buzz, to keep his full identity a secret. Even the verse right before today's reading—it's another warning to his disciples to keep it quiet. But then he begins to teach them about the work ahead of him. He teaches with a word Mark only uses the word once, in this whole gospel: *παρησιᾶ* (par-REE-sia), “openly.” **31** *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. 32 He said all this quite openly.*

Jesus took the enormous risk—a risk he wasn't always willing to take, a risk that took a lot of growing, and praying, and living, and listening, to reach into—he took the enormous risk of opening himself up to let the truth he carried pour out, and that same opening let the world pour in. And Peter—his friend, his follower, his honestly, painfully human disciple, began to give him hell. You know the hell I'm talking about: the hell of denial, the hell of “you don't know what you're talking about,” the hell of “shut up. I don't have to listen to you.” The hell we put each other in, every time we try to block out another person's pain, another person's truth: *And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

Satan isn't so much a name. It's a job title. Satan means “the tempter, the one who tests.” Peter was testing the tender edges of the most human part of Jesus: his fear, his full comprehension of pain. Peter was pushing back against it with all the power of

his upbringing, all the things he'd been taught about how you ought to grow up, seek prestige and power, be a man among men, impressing the people around you with your strength of body and will. Jesus was saying, “no, that's not what God wants, at least for me.” And Peter was trying to hush Jesus up.

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

This is the core, the essence, the very heart of Mark's gospel. And it is the most profound challenge. These words of Jesus reach behind the mask each one of us wears, the mask that says, “oh, I'm fine. Really, I'm fine.” These words of Jesus gently stroke our wounded places and run a finger over our old scars, and say, “tell me where it hurts.” These words pull the lid off the coffin and show everyone what the gunshots did.

The writer, Marge Piercy, was born in Detroit towards the end of the Great Depression. Her Welsh father worked with heavy industrial equipment. Her mother's people were Russian Jewish immigrants. All around her, she saw people working hard to survive. She saw them covering up their pain, trying to fit in, rushing past each other on the city streets, lying about their longings and their needs for the sake of getting by.

*“Can you imagine not having to lie?
We are all hustling and dealing...
Our minds charred, we collide and veer off...
This woman, does she measure up?
This man, can I do better?
Each love is a purchase that can be returned
if it doesn't fit.
Hard as building a wall of sand.
Hard as gathering blackberries naked
In the thorny sprawl of a bramble.*

*Hard as saying I've made a mistake
and you were right.
How hard to love.
How painful to be friends...
Help me to be clear and useful.
Help me to help you.
You are not my insurance, not my vacation,
not my romance, not my job, not my garden.
You wear your own flags and colors and your own names.
I am a friend who loves you.”*
--Marge Piercy, from her poem, “Living in the Open”

This is the calling Jesus lays before each and every one of us. Our Christian faith is not our insurance. It is not our vacation. It is a call to loving and giving, a call to transformation. Jesus says, “take up your cross, and follow me.” And I want to stand there, sometimes, and say, “Jesus, do you have any idea what you're asking?” But of course he does. With all his divine love and human anger, with all his holy healing and his embodied pain. He knows. He knows what it's like to have your family reject you. He knows what it's like to be a refugee. He knows what it's like to witness the death of a person you love. He knows what it's like to be taunted and harrassed, punished and hunted. He knows that death is terribly strong, and he knows that, on the other side of death, out in the open, there is a love that reaches out to us, that is even stronger.

Velma McConnell was the wife of a United Methodist Bishop who shared the story of her faith journey with a gathering of students, many years ago. I still carry her words with me. She said, “I don't consider the cross to be a burden to bear, but an 'x' that marks the spot where God meets us.”

What keeps you cowering? What keeps your grip tight and your heart from breaking open? And what are you clinging to, that keeps you from shouldering your cross? “*How hard to love. How painful to be friends...*” But Jesus calls us to live in the open.

--Preached by Rev. Holly Morrison, pastor
Phippsburg Congregational Church, UCC, Phippsburg, Maine