

***“Are You Ready For This?”***

Mark 8: 31-38

*“If any want to become my followers,  
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

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A sermon prepared for Ravenswood UCC

June 7, 2009

Last Sunday as part of our celebration of Pentecost we welcomed three young people into membership of the church. In my sermon for the occasion we looked at the story in the Book of Acts which describes the arrival of the Holy Spirit and all the ensuing excitement that it caused. I had some fun with the text and we marveled at the fantastic Pentecost event with its mighty winds, the tongues of fire, and the speaking in tongues, truly a story with the elements of magic and fantasy that appeal to the Harry Potter generation.

Today we welcome four adults into membership of the church, and while you “grownups” are permitted all the magic and fantasy you want, the text I chose for this occasion is a text for grownups, and more bracing and attention getting than a January dip into the icy waters of Lake Michigan. In this passage from the eighth chapter of Mark, Jesus lays it on the line for his followers, telling them explicitly that his destination is the cross and that those who wish to be his disciples, should “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” The theme of this passage is discipleship. And the demands of discipleship for those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ are exacting. Just as Daniel Burnham said “Make no small plans” so it is with Jesus who makes no small demands. And so my question for you this morning is, “Are you ready for this?”

The Gospel of Mark is sometimes known as the “hard gospel.” It was written during a time of great conflict in Palestine when Jews and some followers of Jesus sought to free themselves from Roman occupation. The socio-political upheaval that raged through the land colors this text. Throughout this short book, Jesus is

unfailing in his challenges to the powers of his time and unflinching in the demands he places upon his followers. Jesus challenges the established order by choosing to dine with sinners and tax collectors. He calls out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and speaks of a coming kingdom of God in which the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Jesus heals the sick and casts out demons from those afflicted as a sign that the presence of God almighty has broken into human time in the form and person of Jesus of Nazareth, the messiah, God's own son.

In the eighth chapter, Jesus is in conversation with his disciples and for the very first time (he will remind them subsequently in the ninth and tenth chapters) he reveals to them God's plan for this one they know to be the Son of God. He tells them of his coming persecution at the hands of the authorities and shares plainly that he will die and then rise from the dead three days later.

Peter, the self-appointed arbiter of all things Jesus, attempts to rebuke him, as if to say, Jesus, don't be such a downer. But Jesus in turn, rebukes him, saying, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (v.33) Jesus then draws the crowd to him and in what educators would describe as a teachable moment, he lays this truth on his followers. These are the words of Jesus as rendered by Eugene Peterson in *The Message Bible*,

"Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"<sup>1</sup>

This is no cheap grace, no walk in the park. This is path of discipleship is not dotted with comfort stations and lemonade stands but rather asks that those who walk this way be prepared to endure the slings and arrows that were intended for Christ. To give of themselves so that those excluded from the bounty of this world, might gain

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8: 34-37 as translated by Eugene Peterson, *The Message Bible*. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005) p. 77.

a seat at the table in God's kingdom. It calls for the contemporary disciple to "be as focused on social and political transformation as he or she is focused on the spiritual conversion of God's people and world."<sup>2</sup> This kind of discipleship is no easy journey, and so my question for you is, "Are you ready for this?"

Being a Christian got that much harder this week thanks to the actions of one self-proclaimed Christian by the name of Scott Roeder. Those of you who have been following the news may know that name and know the story. Last Sunday, a man police have identified as anti-abortion activist Scott Roeder, walked into Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kansas, pulled out a hand gun and with one shot, took the life of Dr. George Tiller, the Medical Director of Women's Health Services in Wichita. Dr. Tiller was a doctor of 42 years, a life-long resident of Wichita, an usher at his Lutheran church, a father of two children, and a doctor who performed abortions. He was murdered on a Sunday morning in his house of worship. The blood that ran onto the carpet of the church was hardly dry before the radical element of the anti-abortion movement began singing the praises of his killer. David Leach the publisher of an anti-abortion Christian newsletter called Prayer and Action News that listed Scott Roeder as a subscriber and contributor said, "[Scott Roeder] will be a hero to thousands of babies who will not be slain because Scott sacrificed everything for them."<sup>3</sup> Randal Terry the Director of Operation Rescue described Tiller as a "Mass murderer who sowed death and so he reaped death."<sup>4</sup> An associate of Scott Roeder's, Regina Dinwiddie expressed her feelings about the murder when she said, "I wouldn't cry for [Tiller] no more than I would if somebody dropped a rat and killed it."<sup>5</sup>

Other anti-abortion activists were quick to distance themselves from Scott Roeder. They called him a lone gunman, an extremist and they mounted their usual

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<sup>2</sup> Brian K. Blount, in the preface to the Book of Mark in The Discipleship Study Bible. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) p. 1751.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Maddow show on MSNBC, June 1, 2009 <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26315908/#31073857>

<sup>4</sup> NBC Nightly News, June 1, 2009 <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26315908/#31073857>

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Maddow show, *ibid*.

defense, that theirs is a non-violent movement that never intends harm to abortion providers or their patients. Apparently they are having a hard time communicating their message to their followers. According to statistics gathered by the National Abortion Federation (NAF), an organization of abortion providers, since 1977 in the United States and Canada, there have been 9 murders, 17 attempted murders, 383 death threats, 153 incidents of assault or battery, and 3 kidnappings committed against abortion providers.<sup>6</sup> While abortion remains a legal medical procedure in this country in 87% of the counties of the United States, this procedure is not available because medical professionals are too intimidated by violence to offer this service to women who request it. The anti-abortion activists that labeled Dr George Tiller as “Tiller the Baby-Killer,” people such as Bill O’Reily from Fox News, are being worse than disingenuous when they claim innocence, they are hypocrites. They are the modern day incarnation of the Pharisees of whom Jesus warned, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.” (Luke 12: 1-3) The culture of violence and intolerance that was whispered behind the closed doors of anti-abortion movement newsletters and websites, has now been broadcast to the nation, laying bare for all to see how a movement that describes itself as pro-life has become one that implicitly or explicitly encourages death. The murder of a doctor sent to his grave on a Sunday morning in the house of God. Shame, shame, shame on them!

Okay pastor, we’re with you. But what does this rant of yours have to do with discipleship? Well when persons like Scott Roeder and his kind take the lives of innocent, law abiding persons like Dr. Tiller, and when they do so believing that they are following the way of Jesus, it becomes necessary, absolutely necessary that

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<sup>6</sup> Data from National Abortion Federation. See, [http://www.prochoice.org/pubs\\_research/publications/downloads/about\\_abortion/violence\\_stats.pdf](http://www.prochoice.org/pubs_research/publications/downloads/about_abortion/violence_stats.pdf)

good Christian people offer a response and provide an alternative to the type of Christianity espoused by the haters in the world.

By joining this church and declaring before this congregation that you are a follower of Jesus, a disciple of Christ, you are aligning yourselves with an understanding of discipleship that draws its wisdom from the Sermon on the Mount not from Fox News. By being a part of this church you are choosing to stand with the woman in the Gospel of John who was accused of adultery rather than with those Pharisees holding stones who wished to extract their twisted form of justice. By being a member of this church you are taking the radical position that declares when Jesus said love your enemies, I'm pretty sure he meant, don't kill them. By being a member of this church you will be called to offer forceful responses to agents of intolerance and violence and speak truth to power whenever and wherever necessary and so I ask you, "Are you ready for this?"

Being a Christian was never meant to be easy, and with people like Scott Roeder and others out there claiming Christ as their own its only going to be harder. We may not like what Dr. George Tiller did for a living, and I believe that good Christians can have honest differences of opinion on the question of abortion, but as disciples of Christ we are called to stand with Dr. Tiller against those agents of intolerance and violence who would take his life. Some of your positions will not meet with the approval of other Christians. They may run counter to prevailing opinion. So remember Jesus' words at the end of this reading. He tells us not to be ashamed of our faith. Don't shrink from conflict but be strong and confident in your beliefs. Don't let others lump you in with so-called Christians who peddle hatred and fear. Instead speak of the Jesus you know. The one who stood with the poor and disenfranchised, the one who challenged the rich and mighty, the one who taught us to love one another as God loves us. And so I ask you one last time, "Are you ready for this?"