

The Way
October 18, 2009
Rev. Tadd Allman-Morton
Westhampton Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

If there was one part of the Christian story that you wish were different, what would it be? Perhaps some of us are uneasy with certain miracle stories and would like to edit them out, just like Thomas Jefferson did, so we could focus on the teachings. On the other hand, maybe we would cut out some of the especially difficult teachings so we could pay more attention to the beauty of the miracles. Then again, if some of us had our ways, maybe Jesus would have some smarter disciples. They always seem to be misunderstanding things, don't they? We see that in today's reading, too.

Now, for me, I might just edit the crucifixion out from the Christian story. At the very least, I would like to downplay it. I know. That sounds sound absolutely daft for a minister to say, right? If there was no crucifixion, then there would be no resurrection. And that would mean no salvation? And then what? Well, I *have* noticed over the years that our God is very, very creative, so I figure that *surely* God could have found another way to save us all. And I often wish that God had. I would much rather that Jesus had lived a long life, and enjoyed all the comforts and joys of ordinary mortal life. I wish he had known the love of a devoted partner. I wish he had been able to raise children, and to see grandkids grow, too. If any one person deserved a comfortable earthly life, it is certainly Jesus.

But it just wasn't in the cards. Christ's life on earth was full of struggle. He slept outdoors a lot, just like a homeless person. He relied on the generosity of others for his food. When he preached he was sometimes run out of towns. And through it all, the religious authorities of his own tradition were challenging him, trying to thwart him, and ultimately collaborated with the Romans to do him in.

Of course, even amid all the struggles of his life, Jesus did many amazing things. He performed all those miracles we spend so much time wrestling with. He preached to thousands of folks at a time—and without all the bells, whistles and audio-visual equipment which enable modern Mega-Church pastors to do so. He fed the poor, healed the sick, and crossed the cultural divides of his time and, in doing so, demonstrated that at the core of his being were an abiding and deep love, and a limitless compassion. And he showed us that same was true for God's core, and even within our own if we would only live into it. His was a good life...a great life...a transforming and enriching life.

Which brings me to another reason I might play down the crucifixion if I could: it has been an attention hog in the Christian imagination throughout history. The whole of Christ's passion—

from arrest to death took perhaps a day and a half. Admittedly, it *was* three days later that the central miracle of Christian faith unfolded in the resurrection. So, the crucifixion was certainly a pivotal event in the Christian story. However, there tend to be more hymns about that day and a half of Christ's suffering than there are about any other single topic: even the resurrection. That is especially true in our hymnal. Week to week, when I am planning worship, it is often really difficult to find hymns on even the well known teachings of Jesus. Something is just a little out of whack about the balance of it all.

And what is true about the imbalance in the hymnal is also true of the way that today's passage is usually interpreted. Often, interpreters rush to the last verse instead of paying attention to the whole passage. Do you remember the last verse? It's a famous one. Here it is: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."¹ And even in that last verse of the ten from today's passage, the focus tends to be on the last eight words: "to give his life a ransom for many." And of those eight words, the one that gets the most attention is usually the word "ransom."

It has long been supposed by certain Christians, some of whom are authors of Scripture, and many of whom are not, that the *whole reason* that Jesus came to earth was to become the ransom for us. In other words: that the *entirety* of Christ's birth, life, baptism, ministry and miracles, were less important than his coming to die for us. So, all thirtyish years of his life, and all the years of his ministry were really a less important prelude to the crucifixion.

Now, friends, I hope you know by now I am deeply, deeply grateful for Christ's place in my heart, my life and my faith. And it is precisely because of that that I think we owe him more than dwelling mostly on *one* day of his life. Now, I recognize that for some of us the idea of Christ atoning for our sins *in this way* is deeply moving, and evokes powerful feelings. I mean no disrespect to the reverence you feel for our Lord in whatever ways you connect with him. That said, I believe when we rush to the end of Christ's life in search of its fullest significance, that we have missed out on something on the way there. In fact, I believe we have missed *the way* itself.

In examining today's passage I think you will see what I mean. It begins with Zebedee brothers, James and John, making an outrageous request of Jesus: that he keep the two of them at his right and left sides when Jesus comes into his glory. Jesus doesn't give a simple "yes" or "no," but instead, after observing that they really have no idea what they are asking, he poses a question of his own: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"²

¹ Mark 10:45.

² Mark 10:38.

Now, the Zebedee boys being a bit cheeky to begin with, reply that yes indeed they can. Then Jesus pulls a bait and switch—“Okay John and James, then you *will* partake of my cup and my baptism, but,” and it is a big BUT “It is not mine to grant whether you will sit beside me in glory. That’s up to God.” None of the Disciples seem to realize that the brothers didn’t get what they asked for. But the fact that Jesus appears to pay special attention to James and John rankles the other ten. They get angry, suspecting that maybe the brothers have talked themselves into some sort of special position of esteem.

So, Jesus instructs all twelve of the Disciples in what esteem means to him, and to God. Don’t be like the Gentiles—the non-Jewish—and lord your power over one another. You don’t get ahead by ruling others, but by serving them. Whoever “wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not *to be served* but *to serve*...”³

In the course this encounter with his earliest Disciples Jesus outlines *the way* of his life, beginning with the images of cup and baptism. The cup contains all the challenges and suffering of life. It is the same cup which Jesus asks God to take from him when he prays in Gethsemane just before he is arrested. By following Jesus we, too, will have our share of challenges and suffering. It is simply part of being alive in a world riddled by human failings and sin. We all drink this cup with Jesus, even when we, too, pray to have it taken from us.

And we are strengthened to endure it through the baptism which we share with Jesus. We are all called into being beloved children of God through baptism, just as Jesus was. Not every one of us has passed through the water in the ritual, but by virtue of gathering together in Jesus’ name and continuing his work together we all join in his baptism. It makes us all part of Christ’s body on earth, able to draw on the transcending power of God’s love, mercy and justice.

Then Jesus refers to the most important part of his way: serving others; and offering our *lives* as a ransom for many. Not through just one particular moment from our lives; but from *our full lives*: our suffering and celebrations, our highs and lows, everything we got. Lives lived in love and service act as ransoms for the lives of those around them. They invite others into loving service, and help to widen God’s circle of grace and salvation.

And that’s the good news of Mark’s gospel this morning: we are invited to *thank* Jesus for opening the way into an abundant life. We are invited to *follow* Jesus in creating abundant life in the here and now. And we are invited to *remember* that no matter what our cup may contain that we drink it *with* Jesus and one another, and with God. The full life of Jesus Christ—his birth, his

³ Mark 10:44-45a.

ministry, his miracles, his crucifixion, his resurrection, his ascension, and his reaching out to us even today all show us that love is within God's core, and even within our own if we will only live into it. We, too, can follow *the way* of Jesus to live good lives...great lives...transforming and enriching lives.

Amen?

Mark 10:35-45

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" 39 They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." 41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42 So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."