

## *Wrong Turns, Miscues, and Other Spiritual Blessings*

The second sermon in a Lenten series entitled *Journeying to Jerusalem*

Mark 8.31-37

*The Second Sunday of Lent*

March 8, 2009

The people God has chosen to use throughout history, and still today, are never the good and moral and qualified people. They're faulty and flawed and complicated enough to be fascinating and infuriating.

- From *Certain Women*, by Madeleine L'Engle (adapted)

### *The Reading*

He then began explaining things to them: "It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive." He said this simply and clearly so they couldn't miss it. But Peter grabbed him in protest. Turning and seeing his disciples wavering, wondering what to believe, Jesus confronted Peter. "Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works." Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "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?" (From *The Message* paraphrase of the bible)

### *Peter Sets the Stage*

The meaning of today's gospel reading nearly jumps off the page in Eugene Peterson's modern language paraphrase of the Christian bible called simply *The Message*. I'm sure you will agree that the dynamic of the exchange between Jesus and Peter is presented in a vibrant and compelling manner. Most, I think, would agree with this; with the possible exception of anyone who works in the world of publishing. Anyone who works in this industry that depends so heavily on "self help" publications would find it disconcerting to hear Jesus assert that "Self-help is no help at all." Nevertheless, this expression seems to capture his intent. Most notions of the spiritual life are mistaken or misleading, if not downright wrongheaded, Jesus implies. This is especially true if the spiritual life is approached with the idea of self sufficiency; that is to

---

*James R. "Bo" Crowe*  
*Overland Park Christian Church*

say, the old “I can do it on my own” syndrome. This would seem to apply to Peter who was nothing if not stubbornly self reliant, and prone to misconceptions and half baked ideas. You might say that Peter exemplifies the title of today’s sermon, *Wrong Turns, Miscues, and Other Spiritual Blessings*. He made so many wrong turns and false starts at the beginning of his relationship with Jesus; and he suffered from so many miscues. It would be a mistake, however, to give up on Peter, because God molded him over time and used him in powerful ways in his ministry. Was it despite his weakness, wrong turns, and faux pas that God was able to use him? Or did God somehow use Peter’s miscues; was God able to weave them into the man of faith Peter was to become?

### *Another Possible Explanation*

These are significant questions for us because most of us, if we are honest, find ourselves in the same situation. We find ourselves needing to compensate for wrong turns, miscues, and other mistakes along the way; all the while hoping that God will choose to overlook or work around them, and bless us anyway. Frederick Buechner readily admits his inability to live a sustained life of faith. His highly esteemed work *The Alphabet of Grace*, for example, begins with the scandalous confession that he is a part-time Christian. Part of the time, he observes, is the most he can manage to live out his faith with any deeply felt conviction. The rest of the time he won’t claim to be Christian in any sense that matters much to Christ, or to anybody else for that matter.<sup>1</sup> I must confess, I can identify with this predicament. There are times when I want nothing more than to pray deeply and effectively, but am distracted by this, that, or the other until I’ve lost the opportunity ...or the desire. There are times I so want to go deeper into the spiritual life; but to be honest there are other times I just can’t be bothered.

Why is it so difficult to sustain the life of faith, and to live our spiritual lives faithfully and fully? Perhaps we are unable to embrace the spiritual life more fully because of its enigmatic and mysterious nature. Spirituality can be a tough nut to crack; indeed, even its language is difficult to understand. The *Dao di Jing*, for example, opens with the assertion that any path that can be named is not the ascending path, not the path that leads to peace and fulfillment.

Again, the Hindus' beloved *Bhagavad-Gita* observes that the light of day is as darkness to the spiritually accomplished, while the darkness of the soul is as the light of day. But we need not turn to the Eastern, mystical traditions to find mystery; the teachings of Jesus certainly present no less significant a challenge to understanding and application. Leave the dead to bury the dead, he advises; save your lives by losing them; and return abuse and enmity with love, praying especially for those who persecute you.

Maybe it is hard to live a sustained life of faith because it is so mysterious- so difficult to unravel - but somehow, I think, that's not the case. There is another possible explanation. It could well be that it is much more convenient for us not to live our faith fully. It's a whole lot easier to wrap up the spiritual aspect of our lives and tie it nicely with a bow. Then we can pull it out when needed; we can pull it out on Sundays when we gather with all those other saintly children of God; we can even pull it out during the week on occasion; especially when we are alone and won't be embarrassed by it, or if we need something from God. When we're at work, however, it's simply not convenient to be constrained by faith. Competitiveness, for example, often requires ruthlessness; to rise to the height of our ambition requires the willingness to climb over people when necessary. In such cases it's not convenient to respond as a Christian.

Again, when we are out and about in the community seeking influence, respect, and recognition; when we are working for the good of the community and need to get things done and done *now*; at such times it's not convenient to be constrained by faith. As often as not, I think, we don't sustain our faith and live it fully because it's more convenient not to. For many of us the best case scenario is simple; to have enough of a spiritual life to know that we're on speaking terms with God, but not so much that it cramps our style.

### *Love Always Wins*

Peter's problem in his encounter with Jesus began with just such a neatly packaged faith. He knew that God loved him, and he knew exactly what God expected of him; at least he thought he did. He also knew that God's Messiah would soon come in power to stamp out injustice, rid the world of darkness, and save God's elect. Make no mistake; his was a glorious

and powerful Messiah. So imagine his horror when Jesus had the audacity to suggest that God's Messiah would suffer – he would be killed for God's sake! - Peter had never heard anything so scandalous in his life. It was almost blasphemous to suggest that God's Messiah would suffer and die. Cut out this nonsense, Jesus! What are you trying to do, run everybody away? Jesus' response? Get out of my way Peter; you have no idea how God works.

Peter's faith was conveniently wrapped and tied. To be sure, Jesus had stretched him beyond his comfort zone from time to time, welcoming Samaritans and walking freely among lepers and other outcasts. But a suffering Messiah! This was too much. To suggest that the way to life is not around suffering but through it! This was too much. But Jesus didn't budge, because he knew that the way to transformation is not around suffering but through it. And he knew that the only way to live this life is to throw yourself into it – head over heels – and let him lead.

Jesus didn't ask Peter to pull himself out of the mire; he didn't ask Peter to prove his worthiness; he asked him to follow ...simply to follow Jesus into the life of love. Jesus knew very well that Peter would stumble frequently before gaining spiritual maturity, and he knew that God could and would use his missteps and faux pas to mold and shape his life. Mature faith attained, he would know firsthand what it is like to be tempted. He would know firsthand what it is like to be a part-time Christian. He would know all of the obstacles that are strewn along the way; and he would know from firsthand experience that God had used his mistakes and wrong turns to mold a genuine man of faith, committed to love.

What would happen if we allowed God to mold us in love, and allowed this love to shape our lives in their totality? Something of a response to this question can be found in the life of Morrie Schwartz, the inspiration behind the bestselling book of a few years ago, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. For the courage and quiet faith of this humble man illustrate the desire of Jesus' heart: to see individuals strengthened in their inner being, to see hearts inhabited by God, to see lives rooted and grounded exclusively in love.

By all accounts Morrie glimpsed something of this spiritual vision even from his youth, because he vowed early in life never to play any role – personal or professional – that required him to exploit others, or allowed him to benefit from their loss. Through the years he gradually

became convinced that relationships, not things, hold importance in life; and that only by giving himself in service to others would meaning and happiness be found.

It was in his twilight years, however, that Morrie's spiritual commitment paid true dividends. He was diagnosed you may remember with ALS – amyotrophic lateral sclerosis – commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease; a debilitating and always fatal disease that melts one's nerves like a candle and leaves one's body a pile of wax.<sup>ii</sup> While facing his own imminent death, Morrie found his spiritual senses heightened, his heart profoundly touched by the presence of God, and his faith in love – exclusively in love – confirmed.

Morrie met on Tuesdays during his final months with a former student, and together they recorded the basis for the book, the last efforts of a former university professor to touch the lives of others. The two – Morrie and Mitch – called themselves Tuesday People, meeting each Tuesday to pose the difficult questions of life, to tap the strength of love and relationship, and to find ways to share this experience with others. Facing his own imminent death, Morrie was still learning to live.

While his strength remained, Morrie sought to share his experience with others; and what experience he had to share. Stripped by this insidious disease of any and all pretensions about life, having no place left to hide, he found one and only one foundation on which to base his life: love. All else fell away like so much meaningless chaff. He saw clearly that professional accomplishment means little in any ultimate sense; that possessions need have no sway over our lives; and that the true face of power over others is, in a word, ridiculous. He saw clearly as well that only the love he received from others and the love he was able to share provided any sense of meaning in life. Morrie wept when he saw others – a complete culture in his estimation – chasing the wrong things and going down in flames. He saw others seeking meaning in that next promotion, a larger house, or even a nostalgic longing for their own youth, and ultimately failing.

Grounded in love alone, Morrie was able to face his fate without bitterness or rancor; indeed, he was able to accept each day as a precious gift, and learned to appreciate all the stages of his life, including its demise. Grounded in love alone, Morrie came to know that there is a dimension of life – its very heart – that can never be assailed from without even by disease

and death, for it is the abode of God alone, the domain of love. Love will remain, he observed, long after the disease has taken me. ALS can kill the man, but not his relationships. What is this but another way of saying love wins, love always wins?

Love always wins. This is certainly a bold and courageous affirmation; but some might call it naïve, even foolhardy. If so, Morrie was not the first to utter such foolishness. Similar words had been spoken before, countless years before, outside a garden tomb near Jerusalem. He is not here, a voice was heard to say, but has arisen.

Love wins, love always wins. This affirmation echoed through the life of Jesus, it echoes through the pages of the New Testament, and it echoes still in our hearts, longing for expression. Please be advised, however, that this is not an affirmation for part-time Christians, but rather for humble pilgrims learning to live the life of faith in its fullness, learning to mold their lives on the dictates of love. Will there be wrong turns along the way? To be sure; yes. Will there be miscues? Again, yes. But God will use those mistakes to mold women and men of mature faith. All we need do is commit ourselves to love and remember; love always wins. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> *The Alphabet of Grace*, p. vii f.

<sup>ii</sup> *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 9. This sermon is inspired by and dedicated to the memory of my mom – Doris Crowe – whose life was taken from her by ALS.