

## “March Madness”

### Mark 8:31-38

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Spring is here and we have turned the corner toward one of the holiest times of the year, March Madness. What else did you expect a basketball junkie to say? I knew about March Madness long before I was introduced to Lent. Actually, for all but one team in the NCAA Tournament, March Madness turns into March Sadness. It doesn't take long for the tears to flow, does it?

Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death ushered in another form of March Madness. No doubt Peter thought Jesus had lost his mind and even rebuked him for thinking such thoughts. Peter's Messiah was not going to be Isaiah's suffering servant but the invincible monarch that Daniel described. This talk about being rejected, suffering and dying was sheer madness. What was Jesus thinking? He had never talked like this. Why was he doing so now?

It was the baseball philosopher Yogi Berra that said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” Jesus was at a crossroads and it was time to make some crucial decisions. He knew which way to go. It was time to head south toward Jerusalem and confront the religious leaders about their hypocrisy. It was time to trade adoring crowds for hostile ones, take up his cross, and if necessary, die on it. It was time to change the course of his ministry and he knew it whether anyone else did or not.

And so, in Mark 8:31-38, we have the first of Jesus' three predictions about his death. March madness was looming and he needed to prepare his unsuspecting disciples.

“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’

Then he called the crowd along with his disciples and said, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels’ Mark 8:31-38.

I appreciate William Loader's insight into this passage. He says that Mark is doing theology and making us think about our faith and what it means to follow Jesus. This morning, I would like to share what it teaches me about faith and discipleship.

**This Passion narrative teaches me that I will not always be rewarded for doing good. I need to do it anyway.**

No one did more good than Jesus. He healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, cast out demons, forgave sinners, raised the dead and taught people as no man had, yet he was rejected and killed by those he came to help. They were threatened by his relentless pursuit of justice and peace. They could not bribe him nor convince him to join them in their abuse of influence and power, so they plotted his death and carried it out shamelessly.

We assume in our idealistic world that good will always be rewarded with gratitude and praise. Sometimes it is. Many times it is not. This doesn't need to dissuade us, though, from doing good. Nor does it need to make us bitter, turn us cynical or cause us to seek revenge when hurt. We need to be good and do our best not for selfish reasons but for the difference it will

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make in our world. Our influence is more important than our ego. The world we provide for our children and grandchildren is our most important legacy.

A few years ago, Kent Keith wrote the book, Anyway. As a student at Harvard in the 1960s, Keith articulated ten principles for living well and being happy that he referred to as “The Paradoxical Commandments.” After learning that Mother Teresa taped these principles to the walls of her orphanage in Calcutta, he decided to publish them and the stories that bring them to life. It is Keith’s premise that we need to face the worst in our world with the best in ourselves. Let me share the ten principles with you.

People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered. Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish and ulterior motives. Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help them anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

Keith has helped us answer a question posed by Walter Wink in his book, The Powers that Be. “How can we overcome evil without doing evil and becoming evil ourselves?” We start by making a commitment to be good and do our best at all times. Isn’t this what it means to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him? Isn’t this what Jesus did? How can we follow him and do less?

**This Passion narrative also reminds me that I will not always want to hear what others say to me when they are honest. I need to listen anyway.**

What was Peter’s reaction when Jesus told him about the cross? He pulled Jesus away from the crowd and rebuked him. At least he showed sensitivity and compassion in spite of his unwillingness to hear the truth.

A suffering servant Messiah was inconceivable to Peter. Make no mistake. Peter did not misunderstand Jesus, who according to Mark spoke plainly. He disagreed with him. He wanted a Messiah that rescued him from suffering and death, not one that would lead him down that road.

Who doesn’t? We all want an invincible, all-powerful, controlling God that, as Kenneth Carder writes, “Shields us from our own vulnerability. This is the God we have created and worship, especially in a culture that measures strength by the Gross National Product, megaton bombs, a devotion to finishing first and which equates power with prominence. This image of a suffering servant God is as objectionable to us as it was to Peter, and we turn away from the God of the Bible that was born in a lowly stable, associated with outcasts, was a spokesman for justice, suffered with people, was executed as a criminal and buried in a borrowed tomb.”

So, what do we do when someone tries to tell us something we don’t want to hear? We usually quit listening and start talking, just like Peter. We simply do not want to hear about the unpleasant truths in our lives or world.

What are you refusing to hear? What warnings are you ignoring? What cries for help are falling on deaf ears?

In recent months, have you heard the unsettled voices coming from the Gulf Coast, the orphans in Iraq, the millions infected with AIDS in Africa, the working poor in our own country struggling to make ends meet, the uninsured dying with curable diseases, those on fixed incomes that cannot pay their heating bills and the untold numbers of children going to bed hungry?

On a more personal note, are you listening to family members and friends concerned about the road you are traveling and where it is leading? Do you hear the words of teachers

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alarmed by your lack of interest in school? Can you sense the worry in your mate's voice? Do you hear your children's cries for attention, encouragement and affirmation?

If you cannot hear these voices, what are you missing? If you refuse to respond to their pleas for help, what are they missing?

Lent is not only the time for March Madness on the basketball court, more importantly it is the time for listening to voices we have been ignoring and responding with our best. Lent encourages us to sacrifice fear, pride, selfishness and stubbornness on the altar of self-denial and follow Jesus, trusting him to guide us with his loving hand. And when we do, the day will come when we gladly hear him introduce us to his Father.