

Title: Opening your mind and heart to a new way of thinking

Subtitle: Often getting it wrong, but teachable enough to get it right.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/UgStRCruebg>

Today's Gospel is one that we hear at least once every year in our three-year Sunday lectionary cycle. The repetition and importance of this particular account is a reminder of how some of the things Jesus taught are so counterintuitive that we need to hear them over and over before we have any hope of understanding them. But before I get too far into the story where Jesus teaches his disciples that he must suffer many things and be rejected, killed, and after three days, rise from the dead; I first want to bring this gospel home with a personal story about an encounter that I had with one of my hospice patients who had severe Alzheimer's disease.

I share this story because, in every cross-shaped experience of our lives, there is a promise. We may not feel or sense it at first glance, but it is there. My story unfolded when I met with a patient's two sons, who immediately informed me that their mother's Alzheimer's disease had progressed to the point where their mother no longer seemed responsive. Therefore, any time that I might spend visiting with their mother would probably not be productive. Yet, I persisted and asked for them to come with me on my first visit.

Before doing so, I asked a few questions. Questions like, what were some of your favorite experiences with your mom as you grew up. The first story that came to their mind was heartbreakingly but very endearingly. It occurred when they were very young, at the ages of 4 and 6 respectively. It was the time when their mom was going through a divorce with their dad. They described how their mom was in the kitchen doing the dishes, stopped, broke down, and cried. Then she took the dinner plate that was in her hand and threw it against the counter, smashing it to pieces. Then, as she looked over at her children, she noticed that their shock quickly turned into a smile. So, she broke another dish, at which she and her children burst out laughing. Then, as she broke dish after dish, they all began to laugh hysterically. After the cathartic experience was over, they all worked together to clean up the

mess. The bond that they experienced at that moment was something they would never forget, and it bound them together as they faced hard times without their dad's presence in their lives.

But the story did not end there. As I took this woman's sons with me into the room to visit with their mom, I retold that same story to her. She looked at me with amazement and surprise, for even with the darkness of Alzheimer's disease hanging over her mind, she somehow remembered that story. At first, she looked puzzled, as if to say, "How do you know me?" Then a look of amazement and surprise came over her, and she began to smile. Her sons, who were with me, remembered the reflection of that same smile in their history growing up. They, too, were surprised and amazed at her response and commented, "we have not seen that kind of reaction in her for a long time. Please come back and visit her as often as you are able."

As I come full circle and apply this event to the Gospel today, I believe that Jesus wanted to connect his disciple's newfound to the harsh realities that he knew would come. And when it did come through his cruel death, they discovered to their total surprise that the cross would lose all of its sting on that first Easter morning. Christ's sufferings became a promise that your ending, our ending, all our endings, can have meaning. The lesson here for each of us is counterintuitive, and it doesn't come easily to any of us.

When Peter first heard about the suffering that Jesus would endure, he was so surprised that he "**took Jesus and began to rebuke him.**"<sup>1</sup> And it earned for Peter one of the harshest rebukes that were ever uttered in the Bible when Jesus said to Peter, "**Get behind me, Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.**"<sup>2</sup>

The reason this particular event is recorded and rerecorded in all three of the synoptic Gospels is that anyone who attempts to live and walk in the Spirit will struggle with distinguishing between the things of God and natural human ways of thinking. The imagery of denying yourself and taking up your cross runs counter to our instincts and our culture, for we naturally want to save our lives, not lose them. We want

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8:32

<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:33

our lives to be a series of gains and not losses. But regardless of what stage of life you may be in, life is not meant to be all about yourself, your goals, or your wants. Life in the kingdom of God is about viewing all of life, including its tragedies, in a whole new way. On the cross, Jesus was able to take the worst that could happen to anyone and use it as an instrument for good, even the salvation of the world. If such good could come out something so despicable, then ***“God is able to make all things work for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.”***<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, talking about such deep spiritual things, and living into their reality in our day-to-day life, is a whole different story. That is why we have the words from the prophet Isaiah mixed in with our readings today. The passage we read is the third in a series of “Israel’s Suffering Servant passages.” In the one before us, Isaiah describes how this messianic servant will find the strength to face formidable opposition. Isaiah writes, ***“The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning, he wakens - wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I did not turn backward.”***<sup>4</sup> The secret of the messiah’s strength is that he has disciplined himself to learn and listen to Sovereign Lord’s voice. The words Isaiah uses for Lord God is Adonay Yeh-ho-vee. The combination of these two words in Hebrew describes for them the unspeakable personal name of God. This means that Jesus made room for a personal, intimate encounter with God as he woke morning by morning to listen to what his Heavenly Father had to say. This was not only the secret of how he was able to ***“know how to sustain the weary with a word,”*** but it also enabled him to find the strength to ***“not drawback”*** and even ***“offer my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”***<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:28

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 50:4-5

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 50:5b-6

Such listening empowered Jesus to pick his cross and “***become obedient unto death, even death on the cross.***”<sup>6</sup>

If this was true for him, how much more should such listening be vital for us. Opening your life to be taught by God is an adventure. It starts by giving the first part of your day to the Lord. Paul tells us that “***if the firstfruits be holy, the rest is also holy.***”<sup>7</sup> The firstfruits of your day can be holy when you discipline yourself to listen to God’s speaking personally to you though is word. Such devotions, like any other part of your life, can have its ups and downs, starts and stops. Sometimes, like Peter, it is one step forward and two steps back. But hopefully, also like Peter, we get up and start all over again. It is also about learning to love God and your neighbor in new and exciting ways. We have each other as we take this journey, and we have the grace to learn from each other’s mistakes. And best of all, we have God’s Spirit to guide and direct us no matter how many mistakes we make. Amen.

### Reflection Questions

- What might it mean for you to start your day by listening to the voice of God in scripture?
- How has the voice of Jesus been something that has sustained you when you are weary?
- How has the message of the cross inspired you to face life’s harsh realities?

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<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:8

<sup>7</sup> Romans 11:16