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## **The Way of Love**

Mark 8:35

As we make our journey through Lent the Gospel of Mark invites us to find ourselves on the journey that the disciples made with Jesus. In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark we read that the disciples think they understand the way forward. They assume that Jesus intends to be a popular messiah who will fulfill the expectations of the people. The people are looking for a messiah who will wield political power. Israel has suffered from the expansion of Roman power over its territory. The people want to see their country dish out what it has been forced to take for so many years. Jewish aspirations called for a messiah who could beat Rome at its own game.

But the journey that Jesus has in mind goes in a very different way. Mark tells us that Jesus describes the role of the messiah in unconventional terms. He speaks of a messiah whose mission is not about conquering enemies but offering himself in suffering love. These are words that the disciples do not want to hear. Peter conveys the feelings of all the disciples when he explodes in anger. He takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Peter knows that this is no way to lead a popular movement. The public will not accept the kind of messiah that Jesus seems determined to be.

Jesus is not surprised by the response of Peter and the other disciples. The lure of power and success was at the heart of his experience of testing in the wilderness. To follow that way is to travel into the domain of Satan. Jesus moves to the heart of the issue when he says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things (Mark 8:33)." Jesus then explains to the disciples and to the gathered crowd what it means to set our minds on divine things:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake...will save it (Mark 8:34-35).

Jesus is speaking to people who know a lot about living for themselves. They have been taught the way of self aggrandizement where the only rule is to grasp what we can for ourselves. That way leads to the dead end of a life no longer worth living. Jesus is inviting his followers to join him on another way. He is ready to teach them the way of love. That is the life producing journey that he has prepared for us.

The Reformation in Strasbourg began with the preaching in the cathedral of a priest named Matthias Zell. After establishing a new direction for his preaching, Zell followed the example of other reformers by finding a wife. He married a talented writer of hymns and social activist named Katharina Schutz. One of the pressing issues for church reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was how to deal with the radicals who wanted a social revolution in Europe which would turn society upside down. Many church leaders were afraid of this movement. They believed that they needed to control or persecute these radicals to protect the reputation of church reform and to avoid the breakdown of society into chaos. But the Zells took a different approach. They responded with love rather than fear. Katharina

was particularly outspoken on this issue. One historian has described Katharina's response to the radicals in Strasbourg in these words:

She welcomed a wide variety of guests to the Zells' home without enquiring closely into their opinions, saying 'it is our duty to show love, service, and mercy to everyone; Christ our teacher taught us that'. Towards the end of Katharina's life, the ministers of Strassburg (by now stiff Lutherans) refused to officiate at funerals of two sisters from a patrician Strassburg family that had become enthusiastic for the spiritualist teaching of the radical Kaspar Schwenckfeld, himself a former house-guest of the Zells. Indignant at this bigotry, Katharina took it on herself to preach sermons and officiate at the burials of these well-deserving women. She was old and ill herself: on both occasions she had to be carried to the graveside from her sickbed (Diarmaid MacCullough, *The Reformation: A History*, page 182).'

Katharina's life was a witness to the way of love.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Genesis we read that Sarah and Abraham make a momentous transition to the way of love. They have lived a lifetime of self seeking activity and have nothing to show for it. They have no children, no home, and no future. All their schemes to save themselves have come to nothing. But God comes to them with a surprising offer. Their identity and their destiny will be changed. No longer will they live for themselves. Now their lives will be defined by a covenant which is grounded in the suffering love of God. Their devotion to that covenant will teach future generations to follow the way of love.

That is the essence of the journey Jesus offers to the disciples and to us. We don't have to suffer the dead end of a self seeking existence. Our losses can be transformed as we learn the joy of following the way of love.