

The Life You Save
Mark 8:27-38
Sunday, September 13, 2009

I wonder each year at this time since 9/11 how to truly honor the dead of that terrible day. There was an Op-Ed piece in the newspaper the other day saying that vengeance is the only appropriate response to the outrage of those deaths. Vengeance against Al Qaeda, against Osama bin Laden, against all his ilk and allies.

That's one way.

Another way is to wave the flag, hold prayer vigils, weep over the memory of the dead. This is a far gentler way, but you know as well as I do what will happen. The edge of memory will fade, the world will move on. It's hard to believe that in just a few years there will be a high school generation born after 9/11 for whom 9/11 will be "just" a date on a test in history class.

So I continue to wonder how to truly honor the dead. I find myself wondering what – if I had the miraculous power to speak to the dead of 9/11 and hear what they have to say – I find myself wondering how they might like to be honored. In my imagination they would have no interest in vengeance. Having paid the price of being collateral damage in somebody's holy war, I question whether creating collateral damage in somebody else's world would hold much interest. Nor do I imagine that vigils and salutes and memorials would carry much weight, either, for as nice as such things are, they matter most to the grieving and not to the dead.

So I imagine that had I the power to speak to the dead and offer them the opportunity to tell us how they would like to be honored and remembered, they might quickly and forcefully ask us not to leave undone anything that is in our hearts: not to leave love unspoken, regret not faced, forgiveness not given or received, a voice unheard, a memory not healed, a mission not attempted. I imagine hearing the words: *Don't leave things for another day that may not come! Why die with life – real life, not length of days – unlived?*

That is how I imagine they might wish to be honored: that we should not waste our time not truly living.

When Jesus asks Peter and the disciples who he is, he really asks so much more. Jesus is asking if they see what he, Jesus, is truly about! They have just come from feeding four thousand people with seven loaves and a few fish. Was there enough to eat? Yes. Was everybody satisfied? Yes. Did any fear or doubt or condition apply? No. Is there still any doubt in their hearts at what God can do?

In other words, Jesus isn't giving Peter a bible quiz, he is asking what sort of life Peter is up for. What about a life that assumes abundance – in spite of the news!

Here's the connection. Jesus, too, predicts that he will be collateral damage in the forever war between God's way and the world's way. No matter, Jesus says. He will not stop doing what he is about – spreading God's abundance in a hungry and hurting world. No, he will not stop even to save his own hide. Yes, there will be those who try to stop him and some of them will use God's name. No, they will not be able to stop him because God's abundance is unstoppable.

Not even death can stop him. Hold that thought, Peter, Jesus says. For now, are you up to following me wherever I go? Who are you, Peter, and what is in your heart? Are you ready to live *unconditionally*?

So, here is the question for today: *What is in your heart?* Have you ever asked yourself this question: *what am I willing to live unconditionally for?*

I can't answer that question for you. But I can say this. You don't have to look any farther than your own heart. It's not about being dramatic. You don't have to save the world. You don't have to quit your day job. Nobody even has to know what you've decided – except that they will see that you have changed -- when you declare for unconditional living.

There was a lovely, quiet, undramatic story on NPR's Weekend Edition the other day. It was actually an interview with Diane Reem (sp?) a long-time radio talk show host. Scott Simon, the host, asked Diane what interview stands out in her mind over thirty years of interviews. She thought for a moment and then she remembered interviewing Fred Rogers. Yes, the Fred Rogers of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, the long running children's tv program. She interviewed him on the phone from his home and she could hear quiet piano music in the background. Suddenly she found herself off script and she asked Fred Rogers what he does when he is sad, since so much of his work for children was so upbeat.

"I play the piano," he said.

Hearing the piano in the background, she asked, "Are you sad today?"

"Yes," he said, "I'll be playing the piano most of the day."

Pause. "What are you sad about – do you mind telling me?"

"My stomach hurts," he said. And then there was no more to say. Sometimes the less said is more. Fred Rogers died of stomach cancer three months later.

This simple story touches me where deep things lie – things like love and laughter, courage and forgiveness. You see, living unconditionally doesn't mean not dying or not being sad. It doesn't mean blogging or tweeting or twittering your inner drama. It doesn't mean you are responsible to fix the times we live in. It's knowing what to do with your

living, how to handle it. How not to back off. How not to be a victim. How not to resent your own life. How to gaze at your own story and smile.

Jesus offers us this morning an invitation to follow him – to take up our own story and follow him into his living. He will show us the way. We must let him lead because apart from him we will falter or lose our way, for we are not used to living abundantly and unconditionally.

In my own heart these days is a prayer:

Lord, teach me your living. Show me how to take the few loaves and fish I have in my heart and see that they will be enough. Among them let there be loaves of rich honesty and fish of ready laughter. May I never back off these things, never fail to show honesty, never fear to let laughter loose. For I believe that as much as I live these things, I cannot fail to receive them. In this is my salvation. To you be the honor and glory in my living. Amen

What good, Jesus asks, would it do me to trade away things like honesty and laughter for anything else? Wouldn't I give my life just to have once lived up to them?

Forgive me if I have strayed far from the subject of what the dead on 9/11 might ask of you that would honor them. I believe they would ask you not to put off your living until tomorrow, for the life you save today may be your own.