

Friends Don't Let Friends Go UnInvited
Mark 8:27-38
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I am going to tell you the truth tonight. This passage really, really scares me. Before I tell you what is so scary about it, let me tell you what isn't. It's not the fear of the Lord at the recognition that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, as Peter rightly proclaims. You may remember that the term, "the fear of the Lord" refers to a sort of jaw-dropping awe one experiences at being in the presence of God. Think Moses at the burning bush. Think Jacob at the Jabbock River. Our text doesn't say it, but Peter, and all the disciples, have met God face to face, and if they didn't experience that fear of the Lord then, they probably should have. Indeed, when we read or hear Peter's pronouncement of Jesus as Messiah, it should probably still give our hardened hearts at least a little shiver, but that's not what scares me about this passage. It is also not the prospect of Jesus calling me Satan if I don't understand fully just what calling Jesus the Messiah really means. God knows that I'm not the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree, and I'm not too afraid of being judged for that. And Satan generally doesn't rate too high on my fright meter. No, what really, really scares me is the gratitude thing. When this whole episode is over and done with, Jesus says, "Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" What can I give in return for my life? Now there's a question for you.

What scares me is that I don't really have a good answer to that question. What are the options? Treasure? Not much of that to go around. Time? That's becoming shorter and shorter in supply with two children. Talent? Let's not even go there. How about love? Is the love I give worth my life? Now we are getting to the scary part. What about my compassion? What about my gratitude? Do I have it in me to give *from me* what my life is worth to me? Or what my life is worth to God? Of course, the answer to all of these questions is no, I can't possibly give what my life is worth to anyone, and therefore the only thing I can give is my life itself. And that is what's truly scary, because it means being all in, a 100%, self-denying, cross carrying, life-laying down, follower of Jesus Christ. And that's the scary truth.

In 1983 in the United States, drunk driving was at epidemic proportions, people were dying and being seriously injured at record numbers, and so a new and powerful advertising campaign was launched, the famous "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" campaign which featured the tagline, "Drinking and Driving Can Kill a Friendship." Years later, follow-up research suggests that sixty-eight percent of Americans report that they have tried to stop someone who was drinking from driving. And by 1998, the accident rate had dropped significantly.

Unfortunately, it is on the rise once again, and despite a small decline in 2010, there were still 10,228 lives lost last year due to drunk driving, which is one person every 51 minutes. Just this week in the news, I read about four people, including an

up and coming California rapper named Ervin McKinness, were killed while driving drunk at more than one hundred miles per hour. It is still not clear exactly who was driving, and autopsies are pending, but the rapper McKinness tweeted just moments before the crash about their exploits, texting “Drunk af going 120 drifting corners [expletive deleted] YOLO,” YOLO being an acronym for “You Only Live Once.” What Mr. McKinness soon learned, or what his friends and family soon learned, is that we not only “only live once.” We also only die once. These are sobering thoughts, if you will pardon the pun. They raise for us questions about the value of life, the responsibility we have for one another’s well-being, what constitutes a life worth living. Did these four young men ever have the chance to contemplate just what their lives were worth to themselves, or to their families, or to God? Or were they too busy profiting themselves to gain the whole world while ultimately forfeiting their lives?

We don’t have to end up on the wrong side of a car accident to ask these questions. Maybe we just need to end up on the wrong side of the age of forty! But for many people, those questions never get asked. You can find a lot of people near the end of their lives who will describe those lives precisely as car wrecks, as being banged up throughout life in a series of emotional collisions and run-ins with the law due to driving their way through life in a state of semi-consciousness. They too only live once, but the end comes more slowly, and even more painfully than if they’d actually been in a fatal car accident. I’m not only talking about people with

addiction problems. There are a lot of ways to go through life unconscious, and most of them have to do with pursuing things that have no enduring value, in the language of Jesus from tonight's passage, in trying to save our own lives, in trying to gain the whole world. You know who you are. Or you know people like that.

Let me lighten things up just a bit for a moment and tell you about another advertising campaign. It too is about friends. It is called the "Friends don't let friends clap on 1 and 3" campaign, and it is sweeping its way through churches in the rhythmically-impooverished areas of the world. It turns out that it is bad form, when clapping to music in church, to do so on the first and third beats of a measure. Apparently, it just drives drummers crazy. To add value to the music, it is best to clap on the off-beats of two and four, so as not to throw off the rhythm of the musicians. Research on the success of the campaign suggests that overcoming the tendency to clap on the wrong beat is actually harder to overcome than drug or alcohol addiction, with a relapse rate approaching 90%. The good news is that you don't have to sober up completely before getting back on the wagon. There is always another song, another chance to get it right. And there are usually more friends around to try to keep you on the straight and narrow, although they may be just as rhythmically challenged as you. I guess churches will just have to employ some designated clappers. They should have special white gloves so everyone can always see who is clapping correctly if they get out of line.

This is very important stuff to remember as we approach ECF's Invite-A-Friend Sunday. I mean, we have to get our priorities straight. We can't have a church full of people coming here thinking they are going to have a positive musical experience only to discover we are a bunch of constantly relapsing bad clappers. Why, they'll run for the door before the first song is over. Well, that is, if we would even clap. I've seen you people. Most of you belong to that group we call the "frozen chosen." You think if you clap in church, Jesus will appear and say, "Satan, get behind me. You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." You know, subconsciously at least, that there is a right set of beats to clap to, but you can't remember which one it is, and so you don't want to be the only one getting it wrong, and so you sit on your hands. As the old saying goes, "It is better to sit on one's hands and be though a fool, than to clap and remove all doubt." I think maybe next Sunday we'll have to practice our clapping, because if we don't get it right, our church is never going to grow.

Let's get serious again now though and remember the good news of the Gospel, that Jesus died even for those people whose only sin is clapping badly, but mostly for people who are scared to death that they don't measure up to what Jesus asks of them, that they are not strong enough to carry their cross or committed enough to give their lives for the cause, or who go through life in a drunken stupor or a state of unconsciousness and never recognize the Messiah in their midst. But if those people aren't here to hear us express our own doubts, if those people aren't

within earshot of Jesus when he calls his followers to himself and tells them the awful truth that he must die and be raised again for their sakes, if they aren't a witness to the forgiveness we extend to one another when we clap badly, or when we hurt one another, then they will never know what it is to experience the grace the Messiah brings, and that we embody despite all our faults and failures, all our fears and foibles. You see, friends don't let friends go uninvited, to life abundant or to church. And somebody invited you.

The reasons people will use to decline an invitation to come to church range anywhere from "I can only clap on beats one and three and I wouldn't want to throw off the drummer," to "the church is just full of hypocrites." But in the end, every excuse is based on the same fears with which we do come to church. That is to say that no matter what objection they may present, it can be met with an honest "me too," that even if it doesn't overcome their resistance to coming on Invite-A-Friend Sunday, or any other Sunday, it does give them a glimpse of the good news that they have at least one friend in the world who cares enough to be honest about themselves, and about what faith in Jesus Christ means, and just how hard it can be sometimes, and isn't that kind of friend a rare thing in this world?

The story is told that at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, when Christians were literally suffering and dying for justice and redemption there, Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to gather his staff around him in the mornings for prayer. And often as he was closing, he would ask, "If being

Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us?” And one honest Christian, upon first hearing that story, was horrified, and said this: “If there’s not enough evidence to convict Desmond Tutu of being a Christian, God help us all! But now I think he was asking it to keep himself and his staff focused on who and whose they were, rather than just what they were doing. They were not simply leaders, leading an important social struggle for dignity and freedom; they were followers, following Jesus Christ in insisting that God’s reconciling love transcends anything that tries to resist it, which apartheid challenged in insisting that different races could not and should not live together. Without being followers, being leaders was not enough; people had to be able to see and hear them following Christ in their lives and ministry for that leadership to really make sense in the first place.”

Friends, it will be your best efforts to stay focused on “who and whose you are” that will speak most convincingly to your friends. It will be your willingness to follow, and live with the uneasiness of your imperfections, that will be the best example. It will be your acceptance of God’s grace in Jesus Christ which will make theirs seem possible too. All of that is your invitation to them, on an everyday basis, your life and witness. But there came a day when Jesus pointedly asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” and then, “Who do you say that I am?” and challenged them to accept the invitation right then and right there. Scholars say this moment in the Gospel of Mark is the turning point of the story, when Peter

declares simply, “You are the Messiah.” After that, the story turns toward Jerusalem and takes a new tone. But I think it is not Peter’s declaration that matters in that turning point, but rather, Christ’s question, his invitation to join him in the fullness of God’s grace and mercy, because that is what Messiah is all about. Peter answered the question correctly even if he didn’t understand fully, and even rebuked by Jesus in the harshest terms, he accepted the invitation and followed Jesus until the bitter, if ultimately glorious, end. That is what we are asking of people we invite to church, nothing more nor nothing less than to accept the invitation and follow Jesus with us until the bitter, if ultimately glorious, end. May God give us the courage to be the kind of friend Jesus is to us, the honest and faithful kind who invites us to life in all of its divine and complicated fullness. Amen.