

“Surviving & Living & Dying”

Mark 8:27-38

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I don't remember a whole lot of sermons that I've heard – including my own! That's not meant to be a put-down to myself or my esteemed colleague Rev. Russell or to any other preacher I've heard – I don't think sermons are meant so much to be remembered in detail in the long run, as they are a particular moment to engage God's word and our lives, and for that to become the pattern for our living - connecting God's word and our lives. So, I don't really expect you to remember this sermon in the long run – but I am preaching this sermon because of a sermon that I do remember; there ARE a few sermons I remember, and this one was on a special occasion – my graduation from Princeton Seminary in 1989. It was in the Princeton University Chapel – a big European cathedral-style – lots of pomp and circumstance – lots of celebration and excitement. And the preacher ascended the pulpit (at a seminary graduation you get a sermon instead of a speech) – and the pulpit was way up there in the Princeton Chapel – and the preacher was Fred Craddock, a renowned Presbyterian preacher – already advanced in years then and still going strong now - and in the midst of this atmosphere of celebration and excitement, Rev. Craddock preached about...the death of the church – kind of sounds like a downer on such a big day, doesn't it?...and it was a sermon based on the passage we read from Mark: as Peter is first acclaimed by Jesus for saying that Jesus is the Messiah and then in the next moment Peter is rebuked by Jesus when Peter is insistently telling Jesus that Jesus cannot die...and what Rev. Craddock said that commencement day is that the greatest temptation facing the church is the temptation to survive – rather than to give its life; that the church is always tempted to fear, to avoid, death rather than to offer its life.

Does that sound depressing? – talk of temptation and survival and death and giving life...it didn't feel depressing to me that day – it felt challenging, true – it was formative for me and I've remembered it ever since – or maybe not so much remembered the details, as carried with me the core of it: the greatest temptation of the church is to survive rather than give its life. What does that mean? Does it resonate or connect at all with you? What does it mean for a congregation on a day like today? – a celebrative day for Hope Church – the beginning of a new program year - Fall activities coming into full swing...worship and education and ministries and youth groups and choir and upcoming events...which means people – connecting and caring

and praying and sharing their gifts...what a good day – what a good church - and on top of it all, what a day for a picnic! Things are going well...!

And on this lively church day this is the message for us?: don't be tempted to survive...don't be afraid to die? Sounds like kind of downer, it might seem. And if not - then what does it mean? What could that mean for us on this good day that could be formative and challenging and true?

It was a good day for Peter – a pretty good time for Peter and the disciples and Jesus, really – things were going very well; Jesus teaching and healing – feeding crowds, walking on water, astounding wisdom – it was an amazing time and must have been a remarkable thing to be a part of for Peter and the rest of Jesus' traveling companions. And then at this high point of Jesus' ministry, Peter tops it all off by proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ - the chosen one of God to bring God's saving power to God's people. Jesus asks 'who do you say that I am?' and Peter nails the answer – way to go Peter! And right at this high moment, Jesus tells his disciples... 'here's what's ahead...great suffering – rejection by the religious leaders – I will be killed...and then rise again.' And Peter, God bless him, takes Jesus aside to lecture Jesus – we're not told the words Peter says, but we can imagine... 'What are you talking about Jesus?! You're not going to suffer and die – you're a hit! – we need to keep this going – this is only the beginning – great things are ahead – don't talk about suffering and dying!' And Jesus looks Peter in the eye and says "get behind me Satan" – brutal – Jesus says that Peter's words about avoiding death are not wisdom but temptation.

I like life – we all do – life is a good thing. And not only is life good, it is tenacious, persistent, resilient – life has imbedded deep within it the will to continue, to live – living is a good thing – and we see God's hand in the abundance and fullness of life, of creation – life is a good thing. And there are also all sorts of times and situations in which people are in difficult circumstances in which they simply need to do what they can to cling to life, to survive – or that life is taken from them when it should not be – and we see in those times the wrongness of the diminishment of life. But this story of Jesus and Peter is speaking to us of a different kind of life and survival and death – it is the reality we encounter mostly when life is good – or when there is something we do have that we decide we must have – or when we take the gift of life and turn it into our possession – or when we decide life as it is, is the only way life can be. And when that is the case, then you'll do whatever you can for life the way it is to survive – to keep it going at any price, because the worst thing could be for life as it is to end, to die.

It's a strange thing though – because that way of thinking puts living and dying as opposites – but that's not what Jesus seems to think at all. After

Jesus' tussle with Peter, where Peter is first an angel and then a devil, Jesus goes on to say that those who try to survive will lose their lives, and those who give, who offer, their lives will find life - Jesus puts living and dying not opposite, but together - in living, dying and in dying, living - and it turns out the opposite of life is not death, the opposite of life is surviving. At least that's the way Jesus speaks particularly to his followers - to the church - it seems to be a particular temptation of the church to survive, rather than to give our lives - a temptation to survive rather than to live in a way that is not afraid to die.

The Church is the body of Christ - the living body of the living Christ who is the life of the world - now that's alive! And so of course the church has to stay alive, right? So perhaps the church should seek as much power and control as it can - then it will be strong; perhaps the church should impose as much fear and guilt as it can - then people will need it and the church will go on; perhaps the church should make sure it is victorious over any other faith - then it will be secure. It's the Church - it's never going to die! To this Jesus says: 'Get behind me, Satan!'

Hope Church is alive - that's a good thing, right? I like Hope Church being alive - and I'm sure God wants us to stay alive - in fact, I can hardly imagine Hope Church not being alive - I suppose the world managed for a few billion years without it and human history for several thousand years, but for the last nearly 150 years Hope Church has been alive and I think it should stay that way. So let's do everything we can to stay alive - let's make people comfortable - and attract attractive families - let's hold on to everything good and make sure it keeps going; let's do whatever we can to survive. To this Jesus says: 'Get behind me, Satan!'

The Reformed Church in America is alive - over 300 years! - and I sure would like the RCA to survive - and I'm sure that's what God wants. So let's do whatever we need to do to grow and expand - let's be sure that what we do is attractive, and that who we accept is acceptable, and that what we say is palatable; let's be sure to lift up what is popular and push aside what is dying. Because what could be worse than the RCA dying? To this Jesus says: 'Get behind me, Satan!' When Peter heard Jesus talking about suffering and dying, he was so upset that it seems he missed something - the part about Jesus saying he would rise again - Peter was so concerned about surviving he couldn't hear about resurrection. I'm no expert in knowing what it means to give your life faithfully to God, but I know I am an expert in turning to the temptation of survival - of fear - of grasping onto as my own what is in fact a gift from God; we all know that temptation very well - in so many ways in the church and on our lives and in our politics and in our world. And so I do

know we need to listen to a Savior who in living faithfully, followed a path to death; who in dying faithfully, embraced all that we fear in God's hands; and who in rising again, offered true life to all.

We listen to a Savior who reveals to us there is nothing so deadly as trying to survive; and nothing so deeply life-giving as giving our lives faithfully into God's hands – even when it means dying. The Spirit of Christ who lived and died and rose, his life-giving Spirit is the true celebration and joy we experience this day at Hope Church – and as we are fed at the table of our Lord, we do so not to survive, but to be nourished in the calling Christ speaks to us: giving our lives as a Church into God's hand for the life of the world – the call not to surviving, but to living and dying and rising, the way of Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN