

Today we continue our study during Lent to read through the passion narrative from the gospel of Mark. These are the stories leading up to and including the death of Jesus. We had encountered Judas who would betray Jesus and how Jesus served him communion even though he knew he was a betrayer. We read of the woman who dumped expensive perfume on the head of Jesus and how Jesus affirmed her faith in him. Last week we read of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and his prayer to ask God to not lead him down the difficult road that God was leading him down.

Today we come to the point in the story where the courage of Jesus is tested. In this reading we are confronted with two models of how to lead when challenged with doing the right thing. And the consequence for doing the right thing for both of them is most likely torture and death. So let us read about how two individuals respond when they are faced with a choice.

Read Mark 14: 29-31 and 14:53-72

On the one hand, we have Jesus Christ. Jesus is on trial before the Jewish religious council or Sanhedrin. This is not a fair trial. The prosecution puts up many false witnesses who testify against him. The testimony from these many false witnesses do not add up. But that doesn't matter. Finally the chief priest asks him if he is the Messiah or Christ. And Jesus says "I Am." So the crowd begins to spit on him. They blindfold him. They beat him up.

When Jesus was challenged to be bold and to tell the truth, Jesus stood strong and did not back down. Yes, I am the Messiah. I am the Christ. Even though he knows that this bold proclamation will ultimately lead to his torture and death, Jesus shows what kind of leader he is. He boldly proclaims the truth about who he is.

Now contrast Jesus with one of his closest followers, Simon Peter. Peter is not just any follower. Peter is the one who is fishing when Jesus comes upon him and Peter proclaims that he will leave everything to follow Jesus. Peter is the one mentioned first when the Apostles are mentioned which would convey that he was the leader. Peter is the one who goes up the mountain with Jesus where Jesus is transfigured. Peter is the one who is recorded elsewhere as being the one whom Christ will build his church upon. Peter was a central player in the ministry of Jesus and in the beginning of the early church.

But in this passage which we have just read, Peter shows none of that courage. When faced with questions about whether or not he is a follower of Jesus, Peter at first acts ignorant. "I don't know what you are talking about," he shares. And then Peter is asked again if he is a follower of Jesus, but this time he says he has no connection to the Christian community. A third time Peter is asked if he knows Jesus, this time Peter says he does not have any relationship with Jesus. When faced with this opportunity to be bold and proclaim who he is aligned to, Peter fails. Peter caves. Peter wimps out.

At the Presbytery meeting on Thursday, we heard a sermon from the Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka who is one of my professors at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta. Rodger shared the story of two students at Emory University who graduated in 2007. Elizabeth Sholtys and Robbie Brown met while they were giving campus tours to potential students. Robbie learned that Elizabeth had gone to India in high school to learn about and photograph street children on the streets of Mumbai.

Elizabeth returned from her experience convinced that she should start an orphanage. She was dissatisfied with what she saw as the care and outreach which was available to the thousands of street children who had no real chance of survival on these streets. But Elizabeth did not see the hopelessness of the situation. She saw that she was called to do something in a small way to address the problem.

Elizabeth also read a book called *Mountains to Mountains* written by a medical student who started a non-profit medical mission in Haiti while he was still a medical student. If he could start a medical mission while a medical student then she could start an orphanage while a college student.

So Elizabeth enrolled in Emory University and convinced her professors that she could complete her Emory University degree in Anthropology while she returned to India. Her professors were very skeptical. But Elizabeth was the type of person who would not take no for an answer. So Elizabeth returned to India to complete her Emory degree and to start an orphanage in Mumbai. Using what little money she had and her wisdom from her 21 years of life, she started with 3 children to teach them to read, to feed them, to love them.

Robbie Brown was a fellow student at Emory. A very high achieving student at Emory, Robbie received The Lucius Lamar McMullan Award which is given to a graduating senior who exhibits "outstanding citizenship, exceptional leadership and potential for service to his or her community, the nation and the world." The donor's intention is to allow a student to do something he or she wouldn't otherwise be able to do. The winner receives \$20,000, no strings attached.

Robbie Brown received his \$20,000 award. He could have done anything he wanted with this money. There were no strings attached. After receiving notice of the award, Robbie remembered meeting Elizabeth at a recruitment weekend at Emory. He always admired that "crazy student that went to India to start an orphanage."

After receiving notice that he was given the award, Robbie chose to contact Elizabeth Sholtys. He chose to contact her and inform her that he was giving the entire \$20,000 to her. He could have done anything with that money. He could have used it to further his career. He could have used it to reimburse his school expenses. Instead, he gave it all to her.

Through this donation, this orphanage continues to grow and serve many more children on the streets of India. The orphanage employs mostly college students from the US and around the world who come to the orphanage to work at improving the lives of these children who now have hope in the midst of the hopelessness all around them.

You and I are faced with choices in our life when we can bow under pressure and do the safe thing. We can bow under pressure and do the thing that we think will protect our lives. We can bow under pressure and do the thing that people around us say is the easy way to go.

We can be like Peter in this story and cave into pressure which says, “do you follow Jesus and live a life of radical obedience to him?” Oh no, not me.

Or we can be inspired by the Elizabeth Sholtys and Robbie Browns of the world.

The people who followed the model of Jesus who stood up and did the things in the world that are right even at the risk of losing so much of what others say is important.

When we are faced with these kinds of choices, are we going to show the fear of Peter or the courage of Jesus? AMEN.

-Brown, Robbie, “Brave Hearts,” Emory Magazine, http://www.emory.edu/EMORY_MAGAZINE/2008/autumn/sholtys.html

-Given: March 18, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)