

August 14, 2021

“An Act of Will”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 8:31-38

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Well, tomorrow is the 49th running of the Falmouth Road Race. For established runners, this might be considered a relatively short race. Only seven miles. So for the likes of someone such as Diane Huban, who trains almost daily and runs half and full marathons, as well as competes in triathlons... swimming, biking, and running... this race is probably akin to a walk in the park. But for the casual runner – the general population, including most of us here today, running seven miles is no easy task. Not at all. How do I know? Well, it may surprise you, but there will be two Mincieli's in the race tomorrow. That's right, two of us. (Pause) No, it's not me or John. It's our son and daughter-in-law. I just wanted to see your reaction!

Seriously though, being a committed long distance runner does take a lot of training and work and will. If you watched some of the Olympics marathon racers last weekend I think you would agree. And, to draw an analogy, that kind of dedication may not be so different than that of our Christian faith journey. Because remember how St. Paul described his life as he neared the end: “I have run the race, I have kept the faith, and now the prize awaits me, the crown of righteousness.” After all, who put as much work and effort into living out the faith as Paul did? And yet, many casual Christians think of “faith” as merely a belief in God, lived out by maybe going to church – at least once in awhile. But true faith is much more than that. Theologian Paul Tillich said that “faith” is the most misunderstood word in the religious vocabulary. So what then is it? Well, more than just belief, true faith is an act of the will, like running. It means commitment to rooting one's very life, grounding and centering one's every concern... in God. Verses grounding and centering one's concerns in the things of this world, in self.

And that's what Jesus is getting at in today's Scripture. To put his comments in context, this is the first time that Jesus is confirming to his followers that he is the Messiah, and then telling them that he is going to the cross to die for the sins of the world, but he will rise again. This is a shocking statement. Imagine their reaction, perhaps their disbelief. And then Jesus goes on to make even more shocking statements. He says that whoever wants to become his follower, must deny themselves and take up their cross. He says that if any want to save their life, we must first lose it. He asks what will it profit anyone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul in the process. He tells us that any who are ashamed of him and his words now, he will be ashamed of them at the end times. Now much of this is

metaphorical. We are not meant to carry around a large wooden cross or want to die an early death. But it does mean that in response to his great sacrifice on the cross for us, we are to nail to the cross those behaviors and attitudes in our lives that are un-Christ like. You know what yours are. And it does mean that we are to die to self, looking at things not from our own self will and desire, but instead humbly putting God's will and his love for his people at the forefront of our lives. And we all know how hard that is to do. Like I said, living out this Christian faith of ours takes an act of will. It takes work and effort and discipline.

So then, how might we work toward deepening our faith. Faith in an invisible and mysterious God. Well, let's go back to a statement that Jesus makes to Peter that I think is most significant. Because if I could put the problem of humankind and our relationship to God into one sentence, this comment by Jesus best describes it. Listen to what he says, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

And isn't that so true for all of us. Aren't those human things, those earthly things, so much easier to wrap our heads around and work toward? Things like new cars, new clothes, new phones. Looking better, younger. Wanting more money, more prestige, more pleasure, all those earthy gods we worship. 'Life is good,' as the slogan goes. So why would I want to carry a cross or deny myself or lose my life? See my point. Things divine, well, they're harder to comprehend. Things divine can appear unfounded, overwhelming and even illogical.

But here's where that act of will comes into play. Where we are to be resolved in our faith, where we trust and believe in the divine despite our doubts, despite our uncertainties. You know, there's an interesting parable about an old Arab philosopher. A skeptic challenged him with the question, "How do you know God even exists in the first place?" The Arab answered, "How do I know whether it is a man or a camel that has passed by my tent? How? By the footprints." Now what is the meaning of this parable? What do the footprints of a man or camel have to do with the existence of God? Well, you see, the old Arab was deeply wise. He knew that there is really no way for the human mind to comprehend God. But his answer in this parable gives us a divine logic as to the presence of God. We do not see God, it tells us, we see only His footprints when he passes by our tent.¹ The truth is, we do know God, we see his imprint by the magnitude of the universe we exist in. By the wonders of creation

¹ Christian Fact, Modern Doubt, G. Buttrick

around us. And, by the words and teachings of his son, Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus spoke so often in parables. Because parables not only appeal to our sense of reason, but they go beyond, giving us a divine logic that touches those deep, those pure places in our hearts and minds.

For consider, through parables, we see forgiveness – how a young son spends all his money pursuing the things of this world, and loses it all. Yet we see the father, God, who will forgive his sons and daughters, you and me, of anything, and will rejoice when we come back home to him. We see love that's persistent – how the shepherd, God, will seek his lost sheep, you and I, until he finds us. How the widow, God, will search for the lost coin, you and I, until she finds it. We see compassion – how we are called to sacrifice for our neighbor in need, especially when he or she has been beaten down and tossed aside on the road of life. This is divine logic.

And once our human minds can wrap around this divine logic of God's, we understand that this is the logic we need to live our lives, rather than the distorted logic of this earthly world. For that divine logic offers us a love, a grace, a forgiveness, a joy and a peace that is far greater than anything we could ever imagine. For consider this. When a woman was brought to Jesus who was caught in the act of adultery, human logic says, “Well you’ve only got yourself to blame. You knew that the penalty for adultery is to be stoned to death. You were caught in the act. It serves you right.” Instead, we see divine logic at work, and we hear Jesus say, “No one is without sin. No one. So I do not condemn you. Now go in peace and sin no more. Forgiveness is yours.” When Jesus is walking down a street with crowds of people pushing him and pressing in on him and he suddenly asks, “Who touched my garment,” human logic says, “There’s hundreds of people here touching you – what kind of question is that?” Divine logic says, “Someone through an act of will, with hope and trust reached out to Jesus Christ, and God will always answer with healing and wholeness.” When Jesus is brought to trial, human logic might say, “Better one man die, so ‘Crucify him,’ ‘Crucify him.’” But divine logic says, “God so loved the world that he gave His only son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have everlasting life.”

And the best part is, not only are you and I are the beneficiaries of such logic, but that divine logic now guides our thoughts and actions. And just think how much better our world would be if we all did set our minds on divine things? Suddenly Jesus statements don’t seem so shocking. For how could we not want to deny ourselves in order to gain all this? How could we not want to give up our life so that we might have that abundant and eternal life that only God can offer? How could we not want to focus

each and every day on divine things until it is these things that thoroughly guide our thoughts, our actions, our lives, and, of course, our faith? Yes, real faith takes an act of will. It takes commitment, dedication and work. But imagine, at the end of your life, saying with confidence, “I have run the race, I have kept the faith, and now the prize awaits me, the crown of righteousness.” Now let me see your reaction! Amen.