

“Want to Save Your Life?”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Psalm 1

Mark 8:30-37

Last week, our scripture reports Jesus telling his listeners, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who want to lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it.” I want to copy/paste that line from last week’s readings, and bring it into this week’s readings, because what Jesus tells us in the gospel today helps us understand more about some life-saving news.

One thing we can often find in the gospels, even if we may have a hard time seeing reflections of ourselves in Jesus, we can usually find something relatable in the behavior of Jesus’ disciples. To tell you the truth, I kind of relish the fact that the disciples constantly misunderstand Jesus, mansplain God to Jesus, make promises to Jesus they cannot keep, and choose fear over faith. Many of us, myself included, could fit right into that band of disciples.

I have a guilty pleasure that I only indulge when I go to a nail salon, which as you can tell is not very often. I love reading Tabloid magazines, in particular, US Weekly. One of my favorite sections of US Weekly is the “Stars... They’re Just Like Us!” pages. These pictures of A-list celebrities doing very ordinary things: Stars... they’re just like Us!

... They lose their sunglasses- this headline shows a picture of Rihanna stooping over a NYC subway grate to pick up her fallen sunglasses.

... they take out the trash!

...they beat the heat (a picture of Sarah Jessica Parker holding up a personal fan)

... they pump their own gas (well, I guess those of us in New Jersey at least have *that* one up on these megastars)

I imagine a bible edition of US Weekly:

Disciples... they are just like us!

...They want to quit their jobs and do something completely different (picture of Simon and Andrew walking away from their fishing boat and joining Jesus).

... They want the best seats (picture of James and John asking to be seated in glory next to Jesus)

... They make promises they cannot keep (picture of Peter, promising to lay down his life for Jesus, then denying Jesus three times)

And in this week's edition, Disciples, they're just like us! They argue about who is the greatest among them!

Jesus had other notions about what greatness is about. In fact, he had just been describing his coming fate: being betrayed into human hands, being killed, and then three days later, rising again. To the disciples, this did not sound like winning. It did not fit into their idea of what would make Jerusalem great again.

The other thing is that Disciples, they're just like us: they center *themselves* when someone they love tells them something difficult that will impact them. The disciples still did not understand what Jesus was trying to say, and they were too afraid to ask. Maybe they had some sense that Jesus would not always be with them in the same ways, and so they were trying to figure out the best among them to take the lead with all the preaching, teaching, and miracles. I can't say that I blame them.

I guess Jesus had to *show* them what he meant, because his ways of telling them were clearly too abstract. "The last will be first and the first will be last." And so he took a child into his arms and proclaimed, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Now I should tell you that as much as biblical culture celebrated children as blessings, children were considered blessings like property is a blessing. They young did not yet have rights and they were basically seen as an extension of their parents. In the hierarchy of society, children were at the bottom.

But ones such as these are the ones Jesus said we should put first. For the disciples then, and for us as disciples today, here is a big clue as to what will save us.

When we first moved to Leonia, my daughter was 4 years old. She quickly discovered Wood Park as a place where, even if she did not yet know people who would invite her over for play dates, she could easily find someone who liked to play Tag and imaginary games. Later that year she was playing with some friends she had made, and gleefully running away from whoever was “It.” I guess she had grown quickly that year, because the playground platform she had once run straight under at her full height, in that moment smacked her in the forehead when she glided into it at full speed. I learned as a mom for the first time that head wounds bleed— a lot! Luckily the police and fire departments were right there, so I was able to find helpers to bind her torn skin with gauze.

We keep rolls of gauze in our house, because our daughter, even as she approaches her teenage years, is playful and active, and we her parents— and even our dog— need it to bind our wounds sometimes, too. My daughter’s second major accident happened at home. “How did you run into the stone corner of the kitchen counter?” I asked my 7 year old daughter when she came to me with a bleeding gash in her eyebrow. “You know how when you are imaginary ice-skating, and you close your eyes to twirl, Mama?” she asked me.

I realize how lucky I am that the child of my heart has had her biggest wounds of girlhood come from playing with playground friends and from imaginary figure skating. Just 2 weeks ago, my sister in Atlanta called me to say that her son’s school had informed parents that “though there have been multiple threats of gun violence, the police and the GBI are on hand and we believe our students will be safe.” They were deciding whether or not to send my nephew to school. Only days prior, 2 students my nephew’s same age and 2 of their teachers had been killed by gunfire in a Georgia high school only miles away.

I recently learned, from a poet Emily Berry, that the word English word *gauze*— finely woven medical cloth— comes from the Arabic word *Ghazza*, because Gazans have been skillful weavers for centuries. The poet wondered about the irony, “How many of our wounds have been dressed because of them and how many of theirs have been left open” these days?

Of course I am aware that there are deep wounds all around. Though we are far from the places of actual war, I have been in synagogues and born witness to

deep, deep wounds, especially following October 7. And I have been a guest for Iftar in the Teaneck mosque, and have heard their deep, deep wounds. In the presence of breaking hearts, my heart breaks, too, no matter the language of your prayers.

When I think about what will save life, it occurs to me that perhaps the immediate need is to stop the bleeding. We need more gauze— bands of softness that add protection, and hold people together until healing has happened. We often do this best when we stick together with people of our same experience and opinions.

But I also know that in our home, when my daughter is injured, we often tell her to take off the gauze, take off the bandaid for the night, because in our home she is less likely to have her wounds poked at or exposed to infection. We know that when oxygen meets wounded skin, that's when real healing can happen. Some wounds will never heal if they remain covered.

I pray for our church, that we can be places where people may bind their wounds safely and find healing. I know our faith tells of a man who could heal wounds with just a touch; we modern Christians aren't so good at such miracles, but we can start by offering space for safety, for tending wounds, telling courageous stories and for giving courageous witness, and hopefully not adding to infection. We do this within our walls, where it feels safest. But then we challenge one another to move beyond our walls to meet with those who may be different from ourselves, but whose hearts break just the same.

Each of you here today is called to be a disciple, and called to some kind of greatness. But consider that your greatness may not come from money or power or social standing. Consider your greatness might be how you give care or welcome to the vulnerable of the community and of the world. Maybe it is a child. Maybe it is someone with great wounds. As you give welcome to one such as these, you welcome Jesus himself. May you find blessing, as you bear witness to the wounds of our community and of our world, to be someone who fosters healing, rather than aggravates infection. May your heart, even if it gets broken many times over, be strong enough to keep loving and keep caring until that day of resurrection comes. May you create communities of closeness where immediate hurt can be soothed. But may you also create communities of

openness, which puts you in touch with difference, so that you are not just protected; you are also healed and transformed, and you can contribute to the healing and transformation, the peace of the world.

Want to save your life? Then first you must know how much your well-being is bound to the least of these. Then you will see how much your life is bound to the life— the eternal life— of Jesus Christ.