

Sunday, September 13, 2015 – Rally Day  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Mark 8: 27-38

### **What a Friend**

A couple of weeks ago I met with a youth minister from a nearby congregation. I was impressed by what I heard about him, and wanted to learn more about more about it, and how he came to be a youth leader. We started out with some small talk—turns out he grew up in Minnesota. “I spent some years in Minnesota,” I said, “In fact it was the years of my youth, from when I was 10 to twenty-one.”

Those years were hard years for him, he said. Things were not good at home. There was not much money, and then his parents went through a rough divorce. He was feeling pretty lost, but he had this friend who brought him to church. It turned out they had a band at the church and they needed a drummer, and so he started doing that. That really helped him, he said. But then he wasn’t sure what he was going to do after high school. No one at home had been to, was saying “Go to college,” but his friend was going to a church college in Chicago, and so he did, too, followed his friend to that. And he ended up studying religion, because he wanted to become a youth minister. He wanted to help other young people what he found, when he followed a friend to church. “What a friend!” I said, “Bringing you to all those places, leading to the place you are now.” “Yeah,” he laughed, “Also, in college, my friend spent a semester abroad, so I did that too, and that’s where I met my Swedish wife.”

This man’s story was moving, his enthusiasm was infectious, and it was a marvel to think it all started with a friend inviting him to come to church. When he did, he found something he could do, a way to be a part of things—in his case, by being in a band, banging on a drum. I think there are many people here who know about the way music can connect you to a church and people in it, can be a thing that helps you, when things are rough. Whether it’s the hymns, particular hymns you know and love, or the sung parts of our worship service, repeated phrases that you know by heart. Or maybe you sing in a choir, or play handbells, or play in an country/folk/bluegrass band.

Churches have long known that there’s something about music that connects you to others and to something greater, to a pattern, a rhythm that was there before you, and will be after you, a cosmic rhythm, but one that also includes you, includes the very rhythm at your heart. Churches know that there are expressions of feeling that can only be spoken melodically, that there are things that can only be said in a language beyond words. Churches know that there are harmonies you cannot make on your own. Churches know that music, in all its varying expressions, can help us become more attuned to the composer of the universe itself.

I listened to this youth minister, and I thought about the significance of music and churches, but mostly I thought about his friend, how it all started with his friend bringing him to church. Of course I thought, too, about how that’s our Sunday School theme this year, how we’re encouraging our Sunday School children—and not just the children, we’re encouraging everybody—to bring a friend to church. (We cannot promise anyone will end up with a Swedish wife.)

Just as we cannot promise that when you come to church the hard times at home disappear. We cannot promise that the tough parts of life, the rough realities of human relationships will go away, when Jesus is the friend you follow. Jesus was clear about that in today’s gospel reading: following him doesn’t eliminate suffering from your life. It includes it. If

you want to be his follower, Jesus says, you have to take that on, pick up the cross, head straight into suffering.

Jesus said that, to his friends, his disciples. What he said, when he said that—today's reading occurs exactly half-way through the gospel of Mark. Up to this point, the disciples have been following Jesus to all different kinds of places. We heard last Sunday how they've been travelling abroad into the foreign cities of Tyre and Sidon, and then way out of the way to far flung region of the Decapolis. They travel out of the way because the gospel goes out of the way—for the Syrophoenician woman, for the man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. The gospel goes out of the way for people who are having hard times at home. The gospel goes out of the way for people who have not ever heard good news. The gospel goes out of the way for people who are just waiting for their ears and tongues to be opened, so they can be blessings, so they can tell others about what they've found.

Now, just after that, in this Sunday's gospel reading, Jesus and his friends are on their way to another city with a foreign, Caesarea Philippi, and it's here that Jesus asks his closest friends a question: who do they think he is? Peter says, "You are the Messiah." Literally, "You are the Christ." What a great answer this is! In fact, it is just the second time in Mark's gospel that this identification occurs. Peter is echoing the gospel's introductory announcement, Mark 1:1 "the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Christ." Half way through the gospel, Peter correctly identifies Jesus, but he only gets it half right. Peter gets the title, but not what it entails. Peter knows who Jesus is, but not what that includes. When Jesus says it includes suffering and rejection and dying, Peter takes his friend aside and tells him not to say that.

And does he hear it then from Jesus! I always feel bad for Peter here, when Jesus scolds him, so severely. Jesus was speaking a hard truth to Peter—sometimes being a friend includes that, speaking hard truths. Sometimes in churches I think we can be so concerned about sounding friendly that we avoid hard truths—at least I do. Jesus knows that the best way to be a friend to Peter is to tell him the truth, the hard truth: following Jesus leads you to the cross. You don't avoid suffering by getting to know who Jesus is. In fact you head straight into it.

That's only half of what Jesus says, though. There's the part about suffering, and there's another part, too. Whatever kind of youth you've had, whatever rough place you may be in right now, you can be at a loss, or you can lose yourself for the sake of the gospel. You can follow Jesus, including all the hard things that entails, and in so doing, you will find life. You will find hope. You will find sustenance. You will find endurance. You will find that you are not alone. There is a community, a church, praying, and mourning, and singing, making music along the way. There is Jesus, sharing your sorrows, and giving you strength to keep following.

Later on in the gospel, Peter will again say things about who Jesus is—about who Jesus is to Peter. Peter will say that Jesus is not, never has been friend. Peter will deny Jesus, not once, but three times. And then Jesus will suffer, and be rejected, and be killed. All of his friends will abandon him. As he is crucified, a few women watch at a distance.

But when those women go to the tomb, they do not find Jesus there. Instead, in the gospel of Mark they find a young man in a white robe who gives them this message: "Go tell the disciples—and Peter—that Jesus is going on ahead of you." The message specifically picks out Peter. "Go tell the disciples—and Peter—that Jesus is going on ahead of you." That is, Peter can still follow Jesus.

Jesus is the best friend Peter ever had. He is ours, too.