

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, FEB. 25, 2024
SERMON: PINEAPPLE CAKE
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Mark 8:31-38

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. **32** He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33** But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34 He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any wish to come[a] after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **35** For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,[b] will save it. **36** For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? **37** Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? **38** Those who are ashamed of me and of my words[c] in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Sermon: Pineapple Cake

This is a variation of a sermon I've preached to you before. You'll hear me do that with some frequency – because truly, the Gospel is simple and sometimes we forget what we're doing and we need a reminder, even if we've heard it before already.

So: How many of you feel like you've given your life to Jesus this week? Maybe a lot of you have felt like well yeah I have, because I'm putting 110% into this church because Pastor Irene is over here wearing us out.

But here's the thing – Jesus pretty specifically didn't ask us to be overly concerned with what Religion and Religious Leaders want. He starts out this speech from Mark saying that the religious authorities have rejected him and he doesn't really care that they heard him. So if you're serving the church out of a feeling of obligation to maintain the Establishment of Religion or appease the Pastor, you're not doing it for any reasons Jesus cared about. I need you to truly ask yourself – are you committing to this church and all the things being asked of you here because you want to maintain the Establishment, or is it because you're willing to deny yourselves and take up your crosses to follow Him? I want to allow you a moment of prayerful reflection to consider this question before I go on.

Again, the question is: Are you maintaining commitment to the church for the sake of the Establishment, or are you maintaining commitment to the church in response to a call from Jesus?

If in your prayers it's hard for you to discern the difference, I'll provide you a story of my own from a moment of clarity I had in the Sonoran desert a couple years ago.

During my time at UCC National Ministries, I had the privilege to fly all over the country and visit ministries of the denomination that support refugees and immigrants. A lot of those ministries were powerful and impactful, but they didn't always really involve being followers of Christ. Many of the ministries I visited joyfully partnered with secular agencies like "Mutual Aid Groups" or "Interfaith Coalitions". You don't have to be Christian to have compassion for the struggling and vulnerable among us. Those ministries that involved secular and interfaith partners were beautiful and I applaud them, but I was often left wondering how faith was strengthened through those projects and what, if anything, Jesus had to do with it.

One of my expeditions involved visiting a huge ministry in Nogales, Arizona at the Church of the Good Shepherd UCC. That church has an enormous multi-tiered food and clothing program for migrants who have recently crossed the treacherous Sonoran desert. Additionally, they have 700 volunteers patrolling that unforgiving borderland and providing water and first aid to random migrants they found dying or sometimes even already dead out there. The ministries of that church culminated in supporting an asylum shelter on the Mexican side of the border, where the UCC jointly operates with the Episcopalians and Lutherans in processing for thousands of migrants daily crossing into the US. All of it was very organized, methodical, and extremely useful in making an unbearable situation more humane. It's probably one of the largest operations that our denomination undertakes and it was truly inspirational to witness.

Yet, any good natured person can agree to volunteer for those efforts –and people of all faiths and backgrounds do sign up for Church of the Good Shepherd's volunteer efforts, which is fabulous. But the question remained – what does Jesus have to do with this?

The woman who runs that enormous migrant shelter in Mexico is named Sister Lika, and she's a Catholic nun. She interacts with thousands of desperate and dying people daily, fends off predatory cartels, and runs an enormous network of staff, volunteers, and partners. She's sort of a superhero and you'd expect her to be very authoritative and rushed. Yet, upon meeting Sister Lika, a sense of calm washes over you. Her office is covered in paintings she made of Jesus standing in the desert covered in sun blisters, Jesus holding dead children, Jesus tangled in barbed wire. She sits in front of these paintings with a cup of tea and Mexican pineapple cake and looks intently at you, like you're the only person in the world who matters to her at that moment. She insists that you take a break from learning about her operations to pray with her and eat some of this delicious cake, or maybe go down to the women's dorm for a bit and participate in the Bible lesson happening down there. There's no rush, she says, welcome and feel loved in this place.

Suddenly the sounds of weeping children in the desert, the radios and sirens of Border Patrol, the sights of desperation and suffering drown out in that moment. You find yourself simply enjoying that moment of sitting in this shabby office, surrounded by Jesus holding all that pain for you while you drink in the presence of this magical woman and the calming space she's created there, just for you.

It seems almost illogical that such a woman with so much on her plate, operating in such a harrowing place, would encourage a very calm, open ended interaction like this like she's enjoying after church refreshments with her best friends.

It was there in that moment with Sister Lika that I felt Jesus entering the room. Not just because he was drawn everywhere on the walls, but because he was invited into the conversation by her.

Sister Lika wasn't like Peter, desperately trying to conform Jesus into the reality of a tense situation – she understood that death and destruction was impending around her, and didn't try to shush it out of existence. Instead, she took intentional time in the midst of all the weight around her to reflect, be present, and invite those around her to do so also.

I'm sure that after we left the shelter, Sister Lika went back to picking up her cross and following Him into the dark places of human suffering. I'm sure much of the rest of her day was filled with processing, management, and the grind of attempting to keep the Establishment afloat. But as I ponder what Sister Lika might be doing right this second, I don't know whether she's busy doing all that work for her Establishment, or if she's sitting at her desk, painting pictures of Jesus weeping and talking to Him about the pain. I don't know whether she's reviewing spreadsheets and ordering baby formula, or if she's praying with a scared group of women. I don't know whether she's baking bread to feed the thousands of people in her care simply because they're hungry, or because they need a moment to sit together in fellowship and courage.

Jesus invites you to maintain the Establishments in your life, whether it be this church, or your job, your home, or your health – not for its own sake, but for Him. When we get caught up in the whirlwind of how to do the process efficiently and according to codes and bylaws, we not only lose a little bit of ourselves in the drudgery of it, but we lose sight of why we're doing it in the first place.

If you're struggling to hear Jesus calling to you during the commitments of your life, I invite you to sit down and provide the space to listen for Him. Sister Lika was a very unique type of leader. I've met many heads of Establishments, and they often seem hurried and pulled in different directions, and the time they've spared for you is borrowed rather than gifted. Sister Lika was purposeful in making sure she spent the time to orient herself to God's call for her rather than picking up the cross for her own sake or the sake of Just Doing What Has to be Done. Picking up crosses to follow a sense of Duty or Pride inevitably leads to

death on that cross. Picking up crosses to follow Jesus, on the other hand, inevitably leads to new life springing out of those places of death and suffering.

Sister Lika understood that the new life that springs forth from faith in Jesus was essential to not letting all that cross-bearing send her and the people in her care to further suffering and death. This congregation, as it moves into a time of intensive cross bearing through advanced risk and commitments, similarly needs to remember to orient itself to the promise of Easter through faith in Him. In any place in your life that feels overwhelmed with commitments, stop to eat a pineapple cake and talk to Jesus about it.

We Christians are unique in the landscape of social service delivery because we know that we are bearing these crosses in a promise of Hope for renewal. We know that no matter how many migrants are served and processed through those border programs, more and more will just keep coming, suffering, and dying in that desert. We know that maintaining our jobs and our health for the sake of This is Just How Life Is produces bitterness with our bosses and our bodies. We know that maintaining this church for the sake of keeping it a church will just lead to tiredness and spiritual and financial decline. Maintaining the Establishment for the sake of the Establishment is fruitless, dust in the wind that produces no new life.

Jesus expects a lot from us, to the point of losing our lives to follow Him. On that difficult path that He's set before us, I urge you all to take your eyes off earthly things like maintenance of the Establishments, and place your eyes on the heavenly things that call us into new life. What is Jesus saying to you in the midst of your commitments? Where are the places of Hope and Renewal within them? Jesus always helps us find the way to new life, if only we stop to eat pineapple cake, weep over paintings, and listen to Him.

Amen.