



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 28, 2013

"What Good Does It Do?" - Mark 8:27-9:1

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A Life of Courage or a Life of Safety

Today I want to talk about living a courageous life. One of the most important decisions you and I make in our lives—and we can face this decision sometimes on an hour by hour, minute by minute basis—has to do with whether our lives are going to be fundamentally about a quest for safety or will we choose a life of courage.

I recently heard Gary Haugen, the President of the International Justice Mission, tell a group of pastors and church leaders that one of the greatest barriers keeping the church in the United States from experiencing the presence and power of Christ more fully is what he called "our addiction to safety".

When we entrust our lives to Jesus Christ there IS ultimate safety in him. There is a profound protection that Christ gives us. We are filled up and surrounded by God himself who has a love for us that envelops our lives and that love does not change. Ever. And from that place of ultimate safety in Christ, God calls us to join him in the good work he is doing in the world and that is going to require risk and courage.

In 2007, during the first trip I led to the Democratic Republic of Congo, I had a conversation with Dr. Jo Lusi, the co-founder of HEAL Africa. HEAL Africa is an indigenous

Congolese hospital in war-torn Eastern Congo. I wanted to know whether it would be wise for us to travel into territory that had been recently in the hands of rebels forces.

A few members of our team had been invited to come and take a look at a water turbine that had failed. A small town no longer had power to run its hospital or keep vital vaccines refrigerated. The people in that town had heard that we had an engineer with us. So, I asked Dr. Jo if it was smart for us to leave the relative safety of Goma and head out into rebel-held territory. Jo said that he thought it would PROBABLY be okay but he also said to me, "I can't guarantee that it WILL BE safe. But I do know WHO will be with you if you go." We went.

In his amazing book called "Just Courage", Gary Haugen tells a great story about the day he signed up, as an eight-year-old, for peewee football. When you're eight years old and sign up to play on a peewee football team you're given a helmet, a set of shoulder pads, and a mouth guard. That should give you a clue as to what's ahead. When an eight-year old joins a peewee football team he's in for some surprises.

Listen to Gary Haugen, "One of the most fascinating moments of peewee contact football occurs

very early in the season. It is the magic moment when the brand new peewee discovers that contact football is about CONTACT."

That's a big moment. That little guy may have watched football on TV, he may have actually been to a high school or college football game and watched other people play football but what he will soon discover is that's not the same thing as putting on your OWN helmet, your OWN shoulder pads and slipping that mouth guard over your little teeth and taking the field. The parallels between that experience and following Christ into the world he loves are striking.

You can grow up listening to your mom and dad and all their friends analyze the football game they're watching on their 46-inch LED High Definition TV and begin to think that football is about sitting on the couch with a big bowl of popcorn smothered in artery-clogging butter. But at eight years old, when you suit up for peewee football you discover that is not what playing football is all about. It's not about sitting in the safety of the stands.

A little kid in a football uniform looks pretty awesome and they know it. When they first get that gear and put it on just wearing that uniform is almost enough. But football is not about the gear. Listen to what Gary writes.

“Then the first day of contact practice finally rolls around, and the new peewee finds himself in a series of shocking and intentional collisions for which no one is apologizing. Shortly thereafter the magic epiphany occurs, and the peewee discovers what football is about—contact. At such a moment, the new peewee is forced to make a decision: does he really want to be a football player or not?”

You and I are faced with moments just like that all the time. When we discover what following Jesus is really all about, will our lives be about safety or will they be about courage? Gary Haugen praises his mom for what she did at that critical moment in his young life. After the first few days of peewee, contact football Gary says he was ready to quit. His mom could have let him keep the uniform and pretend to be a football player. She could have acted like it was possible to really be a football player and avoid the contact of the game. She could have pretended that he didn't have to make a choice. But she didn't do that and Gary decided to go back out on the field and face his fears. And out there, in the game, he learned to love playing football.

Will our lives primarily be about safety or will they be about being brave? To be honest, I'd like my life to be about both of those things at the same time. I'd like to live a courageous life and I would like to do so while remaining completely safe.

Jesus is relentlessly offering you and me an invitation to join Him in what He's already doing in the world. He never stops presenting us with a choice. Will we join Him in the risky adventure of seeking the transformation of the world? Will we seek Him in His pursuit of justice? Will we live a life

of costly grace? If we say “yes” to that invitation, we cannot live a life that is fundamentally about pursuing safety. That's what Jesus will try to get his first disciples and try to get us to understand in this passage from Mark 8. Let's take a look at Mark chapter 8, starting in verse 27.

Jesus and Our Identities, Agendas and Hopes

Mark 8:27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

I love this story. Jesus takes His disciples on a little field trip. They're about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee in the villages of Caesarea Philippi. They're at the foot of Mount Hermon, one of the tallest mountains in the region. You can ski Mount Hermon in the winter—it's that high. The choice of this location for His staff retreat was risky. It was not a safe move for Jesus to make. For Jesus to take His disciples to Caesarea Philippi would be like moving the Hawaiian Islands Ministries Conference to the Mustang Ranch outside of Reno, Nevada or moving it to the Red-Light District in Amsterdam.

In Caesarea Philippi there is a huge rock grotto where the pagan god of flocks and nature was worshipped. You can still see it today. The headwaters of the Jordan River flow out of that massive rock. It's very interesting to me that it was here in a place that was so hostile to everything that Jesus and His disciples affirmed,

that He wants to have this conversation about who He is and who He is calling them to be.

Jesus asks His disciples a question, “What are people saying about who I am?” His disciples had been listening to the chatter in the marketplace. The best people could come up with was that Jesus was like one of the Old Testament prophets who spoke truth to power. That was high praise but it was only partly correct.

So, Jesus turns to His disciples. “Well, who do you say that I am?” Peter, who is the Myers-Briggs extrovert in the group and doesn't have an unspoken thought, answers the question, “You are the Messiah. You are the Anointed One. You're the king of all kings. You're the One we've been waiting for.”

Technically, Peter got the answer to the question correct. Peter got the quiz question right and Jesus immediately told them not to tell anyone about who they thought he was. And He did that for one important reason. He knew that their idea of what it meant for Him to be the Messiah was not His idea of what it meant for Him to be the Messiah. So He told them to put a lid on it.

You and I are like those first followers of Jesus. We can get the answer to the quiz question correct, “Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world,” but we don't really understand what it actually means for Jesus to be the Messiah and the Savior of the world. And because we don't get that right we don't understand who we are called to be. Just like those first disciples, we want to be the ones who define who Jesus is. We want Him to help us live a life of safety when He is calling us to be brave. Here's what His first disciples did not yet understand.

Jesus is not going to be the kind of king they've been hoping for. He's not on His way to an earthly throne. He's a king who is on His way to a cross. And Jesus knows that when His disciples get a clearer understanding of who He is and what He's doing, it's then that they will begin to discover who they truly are and how they can live satisfying lives in PURSUIT of what really matters.

Trivial Pursuit

If you decide to call me as one of your pastors this afternoon, and this summer you invite me to a dinner party at your house, and the evening is going to include some board games, I want to tell you that you need to have me on your team—especially if the board game is a game like Trivial Pursuit. You definitely want me playing for you. I'm a news-junky, who loves history, sports, science and geography. But, in the spirit of full disclosure, you need to know that I stink at the pink category. If it has anything to do with what's on the pages of People magazine, if it has anything to do with Lady Gaga or the Kardashians or Bieber fever, I'm not going to be a big help to your cause. Even though that is true, you will still want me on your side.

If you dislike a game that is fundamentally about the pursuit of what are often meaningless facts, it's super frustrating to be asked to play a round of this game. But the really scary thing for all of us is that it's possible for you and me to devote not just a few hours or a whole day to the pursuit of the trivial. It's possible for us to get so off track in our lives that we spend days, and weeks, and even years in the pursuit of goals and the pursuit of things that ultimately, when it's all said and done, don't really bring the deep satisfaction they seem to promise.

The writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes understood this really well when he wrote this, "All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" He goes on to list a number of pursuits that ultimately leave us empty and dissatisfied: the pursuit of ultimate pleasure, the achievement of ultimate success, the acquisition of great wealth. None of these pursuits, in and of themselves, is significant enough to bring lasting satisfaction.

Rich Mouw is the retiring president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California (that's my alma mater). He has been a great president of Fuller. Rich once wrote about a time that he and a bunch of his pastor buddies got tickets to a Rolling Stones concert at the Rose Bowl. In the middle of the concert, one of the reverends turned to Dr. Mouw and said, "Hey Rich! You know what? There are more people in this stadium tonight than will be in ALL the churches in Pasadena on Sunday morning. You're the head of the largest protestant seminary in the country. What would you say to this crowd if you had the chance?"

Rich said that he wasn't exactly sure what he would say to this huge crowd until Mick Jagger started singing the Rolling Stones' signature song. 85,000 people started singing along with the Rolling Stones, "I can't get no satisfaction, but I try, I try and I try, but I can't get no..."

Mike Jagger and 85,000 Southern Californians came to the same conclusion the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes comes to. No matter how much sex they have, no matter how many brand new cars they buy, no matter how many academic milestones they achieve, no matter how much power and

influence they attain in the classroom, or the office, or the church, or the community, no matter how famous they become, there will always be a hunger that will show up in their lives that can only be satisfied in one way. And that one way is knowing and living in the amazing love and grace of Jesus Christ.

What Jesus says to His first disciples in this pivotal text in the Gospel of Mark will challenge common wisdom on what it means to live a successful, satisfying life. Here's the real Jesus and here's who we are called to be as his followers. Mark chapter 8 verse 31.

The Real Jesus

Mark 8:31 *Then (Jesus) 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, (Jesus) rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 33 (Jesus) called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, 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, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? (That is a super important question.) Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words 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."*

Jesus rocked His follower's expectations and He's ready to do the same to you and me. We all make the same mistake His first disciples made. We want Jesus to be the Messiah. WE want him to be. But even though it can be extremely uncomfortable for all of us, we need to let Jesus tell us and show us who He actually is. He's a king but He is not on His way to an earthly throne. He is a king who is on His way to a cross. A cross is the exact opposite of an earthly throne. A cross is about weakness and a throne is about power. What His disciples will discover is that in the weakness of the cross, God's power will be unleashed in the world.

Things get a little heated there in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus does not fit Peter's agenda. So Peter pulls him aside and Peter confronts the God of the universe. I love that guy. Peter motions to Jesus. "Hey, come here. Jesus, what are you talking about? You're going to freak everyone out if you keep talking like this. Have you lost your mind? You're the Messiah. The Messiah doesn't suffer! If you get yourself killed there is no hope for us."

Jesus' agenda has challenged Peter's personal agenda, Peter's hopes, Peter's expectations, Peter's plans. So Jesus has to confront him. "Peter, right now you don't have God's ways, God's priorities in view. What you have are human priorities, human ways of doing things in view. And your own agenda is hindering your ability to see the truth about who I am and what I've come to accomplish. I am a king but I'm not on the way to an earthly throne. I am on the way to a cross. I'm on the way to Jerusalem to use my power to serve and not be served. And if you want to follow Me, if you want to live a life that is filled with meaning and purpose and satisfaction, then pick up YOUR OWN cross and come with Me."

Lyn Lusi was the co-founder of HEAL Africa, the hospital in Eastern Congo that First Pres. Berkeley partnered with. She died last year after a lengthy battle with cancer. She was my friend. Lyn was remembered in an amazing full-page tribute in the "Economist". As a pastor on the staff of the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley I took teams to Eastern Congo every year for five years to work in partnership with the amazing people of HEAL Africa. Those experiences wrecked my life in a wonderful way. I will never be the same. The courageous people of this indigenous Congolese hospital have taught me what it looks like to live lives of courage and true significance.

Lyn Lusi, her husband Jo, and an incredible team of medical professionals, pastors, and counselors have invested their lives for the sake of those who have been forgotten by the world. It has been one of my greatest honors to be a small part of what they are doing. The city of Goma, on the border of Congo and Rwanda, is one of those places in the world where the veil between heaven and earth seems very thin. Jesus Christ is there and at work. In a place that has experienced so much suffering and pain, the church of Jesus Christ is alive and thriving. They're living in the hope of the gospel, trusting that God is indeed a God who loves them with unending love.

Lyn Lusi's life was not a life that was lived in pursuit of the trivial. Her life was a life given away in the name of love. Lyn did not choose a life of safety. She was one of the most courageous persons I have ever known. She was a woman whose life had been gripped by the love of God. She found her life in Christ and because she did she took up her cross so that others might discover new hope and life.

In this amazing text, Jesus presents all his disciples with a choice: Will we seek to live a life of significance and sacrifice, pursuing things that really matter or will we live a life of ultimate dissatisfaction in pursuit of the trivial. This invitation to a life of service and sacrifice is not about losing our uniqueness as individuals. It is not about losing ourselves. This is about finding our true selves in Christ. It's about finding our true selves in the heart of the one who loves us.

You don't have to move to Eastern Congo to live this out, though you might. The kind of love that Jesus loves us with is a love that can begin to transform our lives and liberate us to love others in greater freedom. Jesus went to the cross to make that love possible. He wants us to live with a deep sense of the ultimate security we have in Him so that we might live with greater courage.

There's a lot hanging in the balance here. Will we live a life primarily in pursuit of what ultimately will not give us the satisfaction we seek? Or will we open our lives to more of God's love and follow Jesus in pursuit of a life of significance, service and ultimate satisfaction? Do we want to be safe or do we want to be brave?

I've been praying that God would lead me to a church that is seeking to live with courage. I think He has done just that. It is my prayer this morning that Jesus Christ will give all of us an even deeper sense of our ultimate security in him and give us even more courage to be brave.

Let's pray.