

Proper 24 Year B

Many of you probably noticed in the news this week a story about a young Pakistani teenage girl, Malala Yousufzai, who was shot in the head by the Taliban because she had been vocal about women's rights to an education. The Taliban maintains still they were justified, and have destroyed countless schools for girls. Her voice was recorded earlier in a documentary, before the shooting, and in articulate English she told about how she had wanted to become a doctor (she is obviously very bright), but that her father had persuaded her to become involved in politics, because he explained that given the present situation in their region of Pakistan, she could accomplish more good. She was in critical condition in a London hospital, but is now improving...she's going to make it...and I'm sure when able she'll go back to work speaking out for the rights of her sisters who have over decades been abused and oppressed...enslaved in the chains of indignity in their region under the control of the Taliban.

How Christ-like, I thought, on hearing her story, she most probably a Muslim...but wherever and whenever one sacrifices one's life for the good of the whole, there Christ is by whatever name he is called. Carl Rahner, the great 20th century theologian referred to those of other religions who serve the greater good, anonymous Christians.

This very way of life is what Jesus is trying his hardest to teach his disciples in the gospel of Mark, and according to Mark the disciples just never really get it...they are too much preoccupied with their own interests...who will be the greatest...who will sit at Jesus' right and left hand...who will have the most power and authority...these are ambitions of the world Jesus stands against...and he explains to them, at least in this gospel, until he is blue in the face, that true authority comes from being a servant of all, and in particular the ones most in need of being served.

So let's back up for a moment and look again at the context in which Mark is giving his account of Jesus' life and ministry and death and resurrection. It is generally held by scholars that Mark was written in 70 C.E. or just after...70 is a red letter year because it is the year the Romans got fed up with the increasing number of Jewish insurrections in occupied Jerusalem...fed up so much so that they sacked the city, executed hundreds of insurgents, and last but not least destroyed the Temple, the heart and soul of Jewish religious and social life.... Mark's community probably did not live in Jerusalem...probably in Antioch, though some hypothesize Rome as a possibility... Jerusalem was too dangerous for Jewish/Christian communities of faith calling for the expulsion of the empire and expecting a new world order...but even in Antioch and Rome, these groups were

in grave danger; suspicion abounded among the Roman authorities trying to keep these unruly Jews and their ideas of revolution under raps....So Mark's gospel is very dark...reflecting the darkness of the times....Mark's gospel has been dubbed an "epiphany of injustice", since one whole third of this gospel is the narrative of Jesus' execution....the gospel has a tinge of paranoia....several times Jesus tells the one who has been healed not to tell anyone...he tells Peter upon Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ....he says to him... "don't tell anybody"....this is a community living under the shadow of an oppressive and dangerous world...trying to live taking care of each other in the face of a riled empirical regime.

It is fairly obvious that the disciples in this text, which in truth represent the disciples living in the community of Mark, a generation after Jesus' life and ministry... it is fairly obvious that these disciples expect the armies of Rome will be defeated by the armies of God....and Jesus insists, persists in telling them, that what will stand against the powers of evil is in receiving and welcoming those most affected by this broken world....that real power, and the real agent of change is service and sacrifice.

In this text he uses an important word....important because it has been used by other biblical writers, most especially by Paul...and it has also been used as a theological lynchpin from the early middle ages until the present day....the word is *ransom*....in antiquity the word ransom most often was used to mean the purchase of the freedom of a slave or the freedom of a prisoner...It is a word of liberation... not a word of extortion which the word connotes today in English.

"For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many," which means to give his life to the cause of freedom. For centuries, from Augustine, to Anselm, to Aquinas, to Barth this passage has been interpreted that salvation, redemption came through God requiring the death of his Son to pay the unpayable debt of human sin...that's commonly called the substitutionary doctrine of atonement....and that over the centuries has been the dominant doctrine, but never without challenge....I want to offer an alternative interpretation, and there is plenty of formidable scholarship out there to argue this alternative...Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan and John Cobb contemporary examples.

To give one's life as a ransom is not to freely offer oneself over to martyrdom, for martyrdom's sake....but instead it is to live your life utterly for the good...for the liberation of all the oppressed and enslaved...in whatever form such oppression or slavery takes....to give one's life as a ransom is to offer ourselves to the cause of freedom and dignity, among ourselves and for those outside our doors... and Mark warns us that that manner of living well might get us into trouble...Jesus lost his life not as a ransom; God doesn't require the death of Jesus

as payment for freedom, that's extortion, and who would revere such a God?... Jesus lost his life not as a ransom...he lost his life because he lived his life as a ransom for many...see the difference? It is a vitally important difference, because the need for liberation wasn't at Jesus' death and resurrection solved once and for all...It, the cause of liberation, still cries out to those who would live as Christ lived...as a ransom for all who are enslaved and chained...still the enslaved cry out for freedom.

This Young Pakistani was living her life as a ransom, for the liberation of her people from atrocious injustice....and ultimately she may well loose her life for it...But that's how high the stakes are brothers and sisters...to follow Jesus is to live utterly for the good of our world no matter the cost. Let us live by this young girl's example, she full of ardor and passion, an avatar of Christ himself....that's asking a lot to be sure, but in prayer and worship and fellowship and learning and hanging together as the beloved of God...we will be empowered to be the sacred ransom we are created to be, the ransom that will free the world, the ransom whose price is our loving our neighbor as ourselves....The story of Jesus is in truth our own story...the story of enlightened and faithful humanity....Jesus and his life and ministry the way God sees us....people of light giving our lives as a ransom, a glorious freedom to our darkened and captive world...Malala will change the world, and others of heart like her will as well...pray for her safety and recovery...and let us pray for ourselves...pray for the courage to not live to be served...but to serve, to serve always...pray for the courage to give **our** lives a ransom for many.