

Mark 8:27-38

²⁷Jesus 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.

³¹Then 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.”

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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.”



On this first Sunday back from summer vacation I have to tell you my favorite family vacation experience. A number of years ago, I was visiting a family farm in southeastern Missouri that turned me for a very brief moment into a bull-doggin', lasso-ropin', dad-blurn cowboy. You heard it here first, just like Billy Crystal in *City Slickers*, I helped to rope a calf.

Steal Away Home

A sermon preached by
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Text:
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When we arrived we were told that one of the calves in this tiny herd of 18 had a knot on his knee the size of a softball. It had been removed once but had now swelled up again. Because of the knot, the rest of the herd seemed to have shunned this calf because he was never with the others. One day I saw the poor little guy off by himself walking in circles in the middle of the field.

Now, I'm not sure if you've ever witnessed a lonely little baby cow doing donuts in the middle of a big 'ole field, but let me tell you it's a heart-wrenching sight. A Lassie movie is nothing compared to Eugene – that's what my family named this little baby calf – Eugene, wandering helplessly, pathetically calling for his mama – *mooo, mooo*.

Out of desperation, we began to hint that maybe we should rent a trailer to bring Eugene home to the big city for a petting zoo. Our host replied, only half-jokingly, that perhaps freezer wrap might make it an easier trip!

A few days later, while out in the field watching the hay bailer – there's not much else to do on a hot August afternoon on a farm – we discovered that Eugene's eyes were covered with a cloudy film and he couldn't see. I'm not sure which is more pathetic, a calf doing circles alone in a field or a *blind* calf walking into fences and trees, and calling for the rest of the herd which he just can't find – *helpooo, helpooo*. Only *my* family, we decided, could travel 1200 miles to find a cow with a disability that needed our attention!

By this time we had built a rapport with most of the herd. Each time we saw our friends we would politely say "helllooo" so there was an understanding of sorts between Philadelphia humans and Missouri bovine. This was helpful because now we had to help get this disabled cow to the pen for doctoring.

Fortunately, or unfortunately depending upon your perspective, there was no camera nearby to record the event which I am about to describe for you. One person drove the 4-wheel drive pickup for the roundup; one of my children rode shotgun; two of us were assigned to

the field with a yellow nylon tow rope from the truck (the only rope we could find) stretched between us, me in my sneakers and jeans (I don't own cowboy boots or a hat!), running through the field trying to get Eugene to run into our rope so we could lead him to safety. At first it seemed like an easy enough task *until* we finally got the rope around Eugene's neck and knotted.

Do you have any idea how strong a baby bull is? I found out as I hung on for dear life as Eugene pulled me through the open field as if on water skis. He was blind; I was just trying to stay upright on my feet. I wanted to yell, "yeehaw" but it just wouldn't come out of my mouth. It never occurred to me to just let go of the rope! Some cowboy I am, huh?

Eugene broke loose once and the other guy managed to get close enough to grab Eugene's head, dig in his heels (here's where cowboy boots would have helped!) and slow him down long enough for us to get the rope around him again. This time we got it tight enough to lead him up the hill to the pen. But then we had to pull the ticks off and paint him with some nasty smelling liniment to keep off the flies and we had to get him into a small fenced-in area until we could medicate his eyes.

Lessons I learned that summer: (1) there's a reason why cowboys wear boots; (2) there's a reason why I live in the city; and (3) calves don't like being chased, they don't like being roped, they don't like being led, they don't like liniment, and they don't like small, fenced-in areas. I call this vacation experience "Ropin' With Your Eyes Closed", a song which only the likes of Kenney Chesney could put to music and make popular.

I say all that to remind you that summer vacations are *over*. Welcome home! No more August days at the beach, no ocean lapping at your feet, no hammocks under the Jersey pines, no hiking in the Maine alps. Every Fall seems like it offers a new start — vacations are finished, school is back in session, the new TV season starts, football is kicking off even as we speak, nature begins to take on different hues and smells and textures. And churches begin to kick

back into high gear again after a slow summer – this congregation is on its way toward some new adventures and some exciting challenges.

In the film *Road to Perdition*, Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks) is a hit man for 1930's Irish-American, Chicago mobster John Rooney (Paul Newman). When Sullivan's young boy inadvertently sees his father murder three other men with his machine gun, his life is in danger as Rooney's son decides the best way to keep the boy quiet is to get rid of him. So the elder Sullivan, discovering the rest of his family dead but Michael, Jr., still alive, takes the little boy from the family home and they are on the run. "This house is not our home anymore. It is just an empty building."

The journey is filled with dangerous encounters as the Rooney patriarch has sent a brutally vindictive assassin after them. Where can they go to be safe? They decide to head to a town on Lake Michigan called "Perdition." It's where Aunt Sarah lives, Mrs. Sullivan's sister, "a beautiful place", says dad, a place where the family visited when the boy was 5 which he remembers as the place "with the dog". It is a place which brings to mind pleasant memories and a sense of serenity and security. It is, Sullivan believes, a place where young Michael can be safe and at home. It is a place to which they can, in effect, "steal away home" to escape the dangers that chase them.

The redemption in the movie unfolds as they get closer to their destination. They are, in a sense, headed home. They are searching for that place which will turn their life around. Michael Sullivan, Sr., evolves from what we initially see as a cold-hearted killer at the beginning of this story to a compassionate and loving father, caring only for his son, no longer for his own safety.

And then they arrive. It's a beautiful scene, Aunt Sarah's house sitting on the beach. The waves roll gently in. Michael, Jr. is on the beach playing with the beautiful golden retriever which has greeted them. The sun is bright in the sky, the sky as blue as can be, the clouds soft and gentle. It's finally a safe haven for this couple on the run from what was once their home. This is now their home –

they've made it. Michael, Sr., watches from inside the house where he has gone to find Aunt Sarah. A faint smile comes to his face as he realizes that his journey is over, his boy is safe. They are home.

It's so beautiful and touching that you forget that the name of the town is "Perdition" – another name for "eternal damnation" or that place which we know as "Hell." And soon this idyllic home-scene turns into exactly what its name implies as the hired assassin hiding in the house shoots Michael Sr. and watches him struggle through the last moments of his life.

Home – beauty – safety – security. Where is home for you? I'm not talking about your house with four walls and a roof or your apartment on the third floor of some brick building. I'm not talking about the place where you grew up or the place to which you just moved. I'm not talking about the place where your family lives or the address you put in the upper left-hand corner of an envelope.

I'm wondering where that place is in your life where you turn for safety and security. I'm asking about that place that God has given you where you can know that you are truly home. We're tempted to believe that our home is that physical location where we think we're safe and secure, where we're dry and away from the storm, warm when it's cold and cool when it's hot, where we are surrounded by those related to us by blood or by choice.

Mostly we think when he get home we're safe. Yet not the Sullivans. They made it home – home to Perdition which they thought was safe and secure, Perdition which ended up being a place filled with violence and hatred and confusion. It was there that Michael Jr. was forced to pick up a gun and aim it at his father's killer, there that Michael, Sr., was able to bring salvation to his son with his last living breath as he shoots and kills his own murderer. It was there in Perdition that Michael, Jr. rejects the evil of the world which has engulfed his life and there that he vows to never touch a gun again. It was only then that true beauty re-entered the picture. And it was only beautiful because that was the last time that Michael ever engaged in the world's violence. Only then was he truly home –

when he transformed the violence of his world into the beauty of God's call for rejecting violence and death.

Welcome home. Where is home for you?

In this morning's lesson from Mark's Gospel, Jesus reminds us what God requires of us if we are to be truly at one with God's intentions for us. In effect he is telling us what it requires to be at home in God's presence in God's world, to be safely and securely at home in God.

Jesus tells his disciples that what he is doing, what he is preaching, what he is teaching is going to bring about his death by the evilness of the world as it exists. Peter confronts Jesus and says, "No you are not! They're not going to come after you. We won't let them!" But Jesus knows that what Peter is asking him is to not be true to God's will – to avoid teaching what he knows is the truth, to stop doing what he knows God has called him to do. It's only by giving in to the powers of the world that Jesus can avoid the death of the world. And he will not sacrifice God's truth simply so he can go on living.

"Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus tells Peter, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Elder and younger Sullivan in the movie made it to safety – but what they were relying on was the safety of this world – the four walls and ceiling of a little beach house in Perdido, Illinois.

"Get behind me Perdido!" If Michael the father had avoided the evil of the world and side-stepped Perdido, the world's evil – that which often looks not ugly but seemingly beautiful and alluring like the lapping of the ocean, the brightness of the sun, the white sand at their feet – Michael the child would never have had the chance to move on toward true safety. If the father had avoided the danger of the world, the son would never have had the opportunity to experience the true salvation that is beyond the world and then share it with us through the narrator's voice.

Jesus tell us straight out. "If you want to become my follower, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." It can be no clearer than that. And to me that says that for me to follow Jesus, to get to where Jesus is spiritually at home, I have something to do in this world.

To get to the true home where God calls you, you have to take up your cross. But what does that mean? What it does *not* mean is what typical Christianity has said it means. It does not mean shouldering the personal burdens that you have in your life and carrying it in hope of a heavenly reward. Think about it for a moment. The threat of the cross – the death penalty for Jesus if he stood his ground and preached the truth – was not some personal burden that he carried as a form of martyrdom. He knew he would face the cross, he knew it represented the best of the evil of the world in which he lived. He knew he had to challenge it head on.

And denying self is not about rejecting selfhood or individuality. Denying self and taking up the cross is Jesus' call to us to follow closely and travel a path of radical love that challenges the oppressive power structures of the present world. This can lead to danger and possibly death – it clearly did for Jesus – because it means challenging face-to-face the greed and violence of the world.

Renowned spiritual author Henri Nouwen spent a great deal of time focused on Rembrandt's painting of Jesus' parable of "A Father and Two Sons" (what we more commonly call "The Prodigal Son"). It changed Nouwen's life. In his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Nouwen claims that this story, as a story of going home and being welcomed home, is the key teaching of Jesus' message.

As long as we belong to this world, we will remain subject to its competitive ways and expect to be rewarded for all the good we do. But when we belong to God, who loves us without conditions, we can live as [God] lives. The great conversion called for by Jesus is to move from belonging to the world to belonging to God.

Once we are in God's house as sons and daughters of [God's] household, we can be like [God], love like [God], be good like [God],

care like [God]. Jesus leaves no doubt about this ...

That is the core message of the Gospel. The way human beings are called to love one another is God's way.... The compassion with which we live cannot be based on a competitive life-style. It has to be this absolute compassion in which no trace of competition can be found. It has to be this radical love of enemy. If we are not only to be received by God, but also to receive God, we must become like the [God] and see the world through [God's] eyes.

Yet we don't want to hear that stuff. We don't want to have to change how we live and think and speak and feel. We don't want to have to love people who don't love us. We don't want to have to feed the children of world – we'd rather just bomb the ones who don't agree with us. We don't want to have to talk to a homeless person on the street – we'd rather just get to work on time. We don't want to get our hands dirty – that's someone else's job. But Jesus says, deny yourself, take up your cross, challenge the world's perspective and do it in the way that you *know* is God's way.

Tony Campolo (in Christian Week magazine) recently said: "I find it strange that the last place I can really quote Jesus these days is in American churches. They don't want to hear 'overcome evil with good.' They don't want to hear 'those who live by the sword die by the sword.' They don't want to hear 'if your enemy hurts you, do good, feed, clothe, minister to him.' They don't want to hear 'blessed are the merciful.' They don't want to hear 'love your enemies'"

Imagine that. I'd rather be a church-attending, self-hating martyr, believing that by shouldering what I consider my life's burdens I'm carrying the cross, than be what Jesus was by actually living my life in contradiction to the world and thereby *really* carry the cross!

Henri Nouwen continues, "When I consider the immense waywardness of God's children, our lust, our greed, our violence, our anger, our resentment, and when I look at them through the eyes of God's heart, I cannot but weep and cry out in grief [which is prayer]:

Look, my soul, at the way one human being tries to inflict as much pain on another as possible; look at these people plotting to bring harm to their fellows; look at these parents molesting their children; look at this landowner exploiting his workers; look at the violated women, the misused men, the abandoned children. Look, my soul, at the world; see the concentration camps, the prisons, the nursing homes, the hospitals, and hear the cries of the poor.

How is it that God exists in your life? Where is it within you that you can steal away to and call home? Where is it within you that God's love is found and expressed? What is it about your life that calls into question the powers and evils of the world around you? What is it that you do that calls to task those things which you know for a fact God despises about the ways of this world? What is it that you do that puts your life at risk at the foot of the cross?

Psychologist William Marston asked three thousand people, "What have you to live for?" He was shocked to discover that 94% were simply enduring the present while they "wait for the future" ... wait for "something to happen" ... wait for "next year" ... wait for "a better time" ... wait for "someone to die" ... wait "for tomorrow". He was shocked to discover how many of us are unable to see that all anyone ever has is today, because yesterday is gone and tomorrow exists only in hope.

We have to be what Jesus calls us to be *today* – not tomorrow – *today*. We have to take up the cross today. We have to face the evil powers of the world head-on – today.

Welcome home. Here – in the midst of others of faith, in a place we call church, in a place that we can come home to – is where we can together respond to Jesus call. It's not easy, but it's what we have to do. Coming home to a place like this is a journey filled with highs and lows, rough places and plains, speed bumps and curb-cuts, but it is a place where we can find that safety and security that home is supposed to provide us. Imagine what this world would be without places like this church in Havertown.

Frederick Buechner writes (*Wishful Thinking*): “For those who believe Jesus Christ rose from the dead early on a Sunday morning and for those also who believe that he provided food for worms just as the rest of us will, the conclusion is inescapable that he came out somehow the winner. What emerged from his death was a kind of way, of truth, of life, without which the last two thousand years of human history would have been even more unthinkable than they are.”

That’s why we’re here, to be about something different than what the bank across the street offers or the supermarket around the corner has or the car dealership down the road world has to offer. We have to be about something so different that others look in and realize they can’t exist without it – without God’s presence. We are about being a home where people look in and say, “Wow. That’s something I gotta have!”

Matthew Chapman is the great-grandson of Charles Darwin. In his book, *Trials of the Monkey* he writes of his visits to Dayton, Tennessee, where the famous anti-evolution Scopes Trial was held. His goal was to write a book poking fun of the conservatism and Christian fundamentalism that still exists there. He is a self-admitted doubter – at least an agnostic, possibly an atheist. Yet in what he subtitled this “accidental memoir” he recalls walking into a rural church one Sunday morning. He was not so interested in what the preacher had to say, but he realized the importance of what was happening. His mind wandered off into the distractions of his life in New York City – bills, schedules, phone calls, work, annoyances. Sitting in this tiny church in Tennessee he imagines inventing a new religion with valuable pieces from various existing traditions.

“This would definitely be part of it, this sitting here... that’s what church should be: a segment of time to interrupt, to *terminate* this frenzy of mindless activity. At worst, like now, the inaction is merely boring and the brain gets a chance to wander philosophically. At best, if one organized it right, the experience would jolt you awake and remind you of your place in the order of things, that you *have* a place in the order of things, that actions have consequences, that life is

beautiful, ugly, serious, funny, very short *but still magnificent.*”

That’s the home to which you and I have come at the end of a beautifully rich summer. You have been able to steal away home to Jesus. You have come home to where God calls you, to where Jesus reminds you about the cross you must carry, to where God’s Spirit fills you so that you can take on the world face-to-face and teach it differently. At times it feels like roping a calf wearing tennis shoes and a ball cap – it pulls you where you don’t want to go. But it is because we are at home together that we can make a difference.

We’re here together. We have work to do. Me, you, the person next to you – and God. So steal away to wherever, whatever, whoever home is to you – steal away to this family that is Hope Church, steal away to Jesus.

Welcome home!

Amen.