

THE TURNING POINT

MARK 8: 27-38

September 13, 2009

University Church of Chicago

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Our worship service this morning is designed to honor May and Harvey Lord, two remarkable people who led this congregation for almost twenty years, from 1970 to 1989, then allegedly retired twenty years ago and after serving in the Philippines for five years returned to Chicago. Persuasive but personable, kind but determined, prophetic but pastoral, intelligent but down to earth, Harvey and May have given themselves unstintingly to the service of Christ and the Church.

They have stood against the forces that would further segregate our city, they helped this congregation to embrace gays, lesbians and transgendered persons by officially becoming an Open and Affirming Church, they led in the Sanctuary Movement for Latin American immigrants, they brought us into solidarity and union with South Congregational Church, May led in the effort to make Chicago a Nuclear Free Zone so that no fissionable materials are trucked or shipped through our city and their love for and work with Filipinos is legendary.

As University Church prepares to make yet another transition in pastoral leadership, we face again all the possibilities that God is placing before us: a Hyde Park/Kenwood/Woodlawn community of neighborhoods that is not only integrated but growing more vital as young families are moving in; one of the world's major research universities and hospitals literally at our front door; five seminaries within a three-minute walk (Chicago has more seminaries than any other city in the world except Rome—which is one reason we are called "The Windy City"); and perhaps—although opinions are decidedly mixed about it—the dream that we will host the 2016 Olympic Games.

Still, there are those among us who come to church with a sense of *angst*—an indefinable German word which means anxiety, dread, worry, anger, loss, fear—all of the above and more. Don't tell me that we are in a post-racist society with the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States when a racist U.S. representative can be widely applauded for calling him a liar in one of the most despicable breaches of respect in our nation's history, when a U.S. Senator from Louisiana who has been involved in massive sexual indiscretions can run for re-election well ahead of his opponents because he is an open racist in a state which gave Mr. Obama only fourteen percent of the vote last year and in our city of neighborhoods which remains one of the five most segregated cities in America.

James Wright has greatly influenced me over the past several years. A remarkable man who spent a lifetime battling alcoholism but finally spent the last years of his life in relative happiness as a sober, happily married man only to be stricken by cancer of the mouth, Jim was buried from New York's Riverside Church where he and his beloved Annie had been married by William Sloane Coffin.

Even when he was drunk, James Wright was a great poet who probed the depths of our fears and hopes. In a poem "To a Troubled Friend," he gives good advice to the friend as well as to himself:

Weep, and weep long, but do not weep for me,
No long lamenting, raise, for any word
Of mine that beats above you like a bird,
Your voice, or hand. But shaken clear, and free,
Be the bare maple, bough where nests are made
Snug in the season's wrinkled cloth of frost;
Be leaf, by hardwood knots, by tendrils crossed
On tendrils, stripped, uncaring; give no shade.
Give winter nothing; hold, and let the flake
Poise or dissolve along your upheld arms.
All flawless hexagons may melt and break;
While you must feel the summer's rage of fire,
Beyond this frigid seasons' empty storms,
Banished to bloom, and bear the birds' desire.

As I celebrate the ministry of Harvey and May Lord, who now live in the autumn of their years, they typify those followers of Jesus Christ who give nothing to winter but live in "summer's rage of fire," committed to justice and peace, mercy and hope. Moreover, those are not mere words for them, not abstract concepts but the very stuff of their life.

One problem that most of us in this room have with today's Gospel lection is that we have been inoculated by years of sermons and Sunday School lessons which have made us immune to the scandal Mark's Gospel is declaring. In a church which prides itself on being liberal theologically as well as politically with a congregation that draws from so many diverse traditions, many of us have come to liberalism from conservative—even fundamentalist—traditions. Thus, while we have moved 180 degrees away from our past, it still imposes its effects.

This whole passage is scandalous. First, there is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, a title which Jesus promptly upends in a way that Peter never intended. Then there is the startling prediction of Jesus' suffering and death, which has prompted theologians ever since to try to decipher what it means to say that he "**must** undergo great suffering. . .and be killed" (v. 31). Finally, Jesus offers the difficult challenge as he calls those who would follow to lose life in order to save it. When you consider the true

meaning of this turning point in Mark's Gospel, it is amazing that anyone at all is left to become a follower of Christ.

The word "scandal" has been associated with the Gospel since Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The gospel is scandalous because it offers the startling and inexplicable claim that this person, Jesus of Nazareth, is both a real human being and God incarnate. We insist that God has been encountered in a Palestinian Jew in the first century CE.

In Mark's telling of the story of Jesus, the turning point comes in this encounter in Caesarea Philippi, up in Roman-occupied territory of the Galilee. Jesus has been teaching and healing in the Galilee, drawing crowds and approval, on a kind of political whistle-stop tour. Everything is going well. Now he begins to question the Twelve, "Who do people say that I am?" In those pre-Freudian days what people thought of you or conceived you to be was an essential component of your identity. Not as much emphasis as there is in our time was put on one's own self-concept. So, the disciples answer that people are saying he is like John the Baptist or Elijah and a prophet.

Then, comes the hard question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter's answer, "You are the Messiah," is so extraordinary, beyond the boundaries of accepted understanding that it should boggle our minds as much as it did the other disciples. It's no wonder that Jesus sternly orders them not to go around spreading such opinions.

Peter's declaration not only compels Jesus to tell them what will happen to him, but it also changes his relationship to the crowds. He begins to talk about taking up a cross, losing one's life, telling the people that all their money and titles and resumes which gain the world mean that they could very well forfeit their life.

And what follows this moment in Caesarea Philippi in the next eight chapters of Mark's gospel is radically different from the first eight. Now Jesus turns toward Jerusalem. His message becomes more assertive and confrontational. By the time he gets to the Holy City on that day we call Palm Sunday, the people who follow him see things with an entirely different perspective. This encounter marks a significant turning point in discipleship.

Harvey and May Lord have faced many such turning points and have accepted their challenges. After they were married in 1947, they accepted a ministry position in the Philippines until 1950. Harvey served at Northern Christian College and the Vigan Christian Training Institute while May taught at Apayao Christian High School. Their oldest son, Tim, was born in Manila. After returning from the Philippines, Harvey served as pastor of the First Christian Church in Edmond, Oklahoma, where Stephen and Marilyn were born.

Then Harvey and May made a great leap of faith. They came to Chicago and he became the organizing pastor of the Christian Church of Villa Park. That meant going from door to door, talking with people, recruiting them for Christ and the Church. Hard, dogged work which called people to follow Christ on faith.

When Harvey and May and their three children moved into an apartment on South Drexel Avenue in 1962 so that Harvey could pursue a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, May taught in the Chicago Public Schools. When Harvey was awarded the doctorate in 1967, they moved to Indianapolis where he became Dean of Students as well as one of the leading political organizers in the state of Indiana. That commitment to politics and faith, the public interest and Christian commitment brought them to University Church in 1970. For their installation in 1970, Ed Campbell led the making of brilliant new banners, Carol Browning wrote a new song, and the publicity for Harvey's installation included these words :

Take your children in with you. There are no long speeches or talks that would make them fidgety. What is said will be in sound, sight and acts that they may understand even better than the rest of us. This is an hour they will not soon forget.

And today we remember. And celebrate. And thank God for the gift of May and Harvey Lord. Most of all, we thank God for their example of faithfulness, of coming to the turning points and moving forward in faith. Just as disciples of Christ have been called to for these two thousand years.

Jesus is calling us to new turning points, new possibilities. We must answer his question, "Who do you say that I am?" each of us for ourselves, and then we must be willing to die to the old ways and move into ever new roads of faith.