

Title: Learning Restraint: a Lenten habit worth attaining

Text: Mark 8: 31-38

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Mark 8:31-38

8:31 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.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 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."

8:34 He 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.

8:35 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.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

8:38 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."

How we live our days, is our how we live our lives.

Habits are the automatic patterns of action. We can do things on autopilot without even thinking or taking a moment to pause and reflect.

Unreflective action may not be good for us, our neighbours or Earth.

In this week's CBC tapestry podcast – Mary Hynes interviews Ainissa Ramirez, author of the book: "The Alchemy of Us: How Humans and Matter Transformed One Another"

Rameriz comments that our relationship with the night sky has been changed by a choice made by the inventors of electric light.

She observed that while our great great grandparents might have seen thousands of stars when they looked up, most of us only see a few dozen today because they are lost under the haze of our cities' electric lights.

We made a decision that we needed light at night – or did we?

Perhaps humanity was so starry eyed by a new invention, amazed at our capacity. That we forgot to ask the question: Is it good?

Lights at night are actually a mixed blessing: Our work productivity increased AND our sleep shortened, our night tasks got easier AND our nighttime conversations dwindled, our house visibility got better AND our view of the night sky changed, as did our relationship with the universe.

(see: <https://www.kqed.org/science/26331/how-electric-light-changed-the-night>)

Rimeriez says: "We used to feel smaller because we thought we were part of something much bigger. We could look out and see the stars and the constellations and we felt like we were just a small part of a larger puzzle. But because we can't see those stars, because the glow of the light has blocked them out, we now just feel a little bit more important and don't feel connected," she said.

What would happen if we paused to think about our values? Asked the question more often: Is this a good idea? Good in the sense of the greater good for us, our neighbours and Earth.

And if it is isn't – resolutely put it behind us.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/from-light-bulbs-to-coffee-cups-how-the-objects-we-create-shape-us-1.5928283>

In the gospel passage before us:

Jesus begins to speak openly about suffering.

Now if we just look at the passage alone, out of context, we may think... that Jesus values suffering.

- It opens with an introduction about his trial, his passion, his crucifixion and his death.
- We too are invited to carry our crosses, following this Human One.

Yet friends, in context we see that Jesus valuing love.

At the beginning of Mark 8 he has deep compassion on the crowd and feeds them.

Out of love Jesus reveals something of Christ to the disciples, the closest human friends he had.

I think that Suffering is not the value. Love is the value.

And when love is great, we may suffer for love if we need to.

When love is so expansive it may lead to suffering or passion.

And the very presence of Christ in Jesus and with us now is the costly gift of God's love – It is the gift of God's self-limitation or in more theologically technical terms: divine kenosis.

Kenosis is another word for God's humility.

An action that is open, accessible, choosing one-ness with humanity.

Divine Love – gives itself away.

Thomas Keating, Reflections on the Unknowable.

And it is costly.

So, Jesus speaks openly about what this love would cost him, and Peter can't take it.

In verse 32 we read that Peter began to "censure" Jesus. (another way of translating the word rebuke). "To find open fault"

After witnessing the feeding of the thousands, and the two-stage healing of the man born blind Jesus asks Peter: Who do you say I am?

And in this same chapter a little earlier in verse 29 - Peter names Jesus, 'the Christ', The Messiah. And Jesus censures the disciples (same Greek word as used here) don't tell anyone.

And then in this account – with what seems to be very strong words: Jesus censures Peter again: "Get behind me Satan"

It seems to be the culmination of an ongoing relational clash.

Could it be that the word Satan here is an expression of a 'temptation bearer'?

Jesus is 'holding fast' to the value of expansive divine love.

A costly love.

And his words to Peter may just be his expression of **restraint**:

That is the ability to control or moderate one's impulses, passions,
FOR the sake of a higher value.

Restraint is a habit built up over time.

And we see it in action in the small decisions we make every day.

- We are faced with the choice to once again eat the unhealthy junk food especially when we are feeling bad about something of shame – and our bodies build up plaques in our heart and arteries instead of dealing with the emotional trauma or pain.
Get behind me temptation. What is the way of love in this moment? Love of ourselves.
- We are sitting in the living room and a family member starts a conversation with us, they are trying to connect with us. We turn briefly to face them but then hear our cell phone ringing. How often do we give up what is clearly in front of us, to turn toward the possible, to the new?
Get behind me temptation. What is the way of love in this moment? Love of our neighbours.
- We continue to desire more and more wealth. Purchasing this and that more expensive item, and discarding the old/previous ones, and we don't pay attention to how these acts of consumerism take from and then pollute the earth
Get behind me temptation. What is the way of love in this moment? Love of our earth.

For more on this see:

<https://vimeo.com/516928327?fbclid=IwAR3tJG2N4pB3RMMQLqxIEu6MvZDIXUInQCEuPjeNQSjeerdqnCkr7x6wMFI>

Sallie McFague (well known for her writing on ecotheology)

Makes this same connection...

in her book: *Blessed, are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*

She suggests that it is possible for people to change from the power and dominance of consumption to a simpler life of humility following the way of Love modelled in Jesus the Christ - a picture of God's kenosis, or self-emptying.

She highlights the self-emptying way of three modern saints: John Woolman, Simone Weil and Dorothy Day.

She notes their experience of the 'wild space' of voluntary poverty, that released them from a conventional world-view.

This experience moved them to pay attention to the material needs of others - seeing others as subjects, rather than objects, deserving of the basic necessities for living.

MacFague then shows how they embraced the universal self - no longer limited by the physical body but stretches out to include the entire world.

And if the world is one's body, then the empathy and attention to basic needs now extend to all the world's systems.

And then she raises up the value of humility.

Not a diminishing humility but the kind Amma Theodora of the 4th century wrote about one that is honest, accepting and loving self awareness as a fully embodied human in the presence of a gracious life-giving God.

The Forgotten Desert Mothers by Laura Swan.

So this Lent is an opportunity for us to alter our habits.

To practice restraint: Get behind me temptation.

To take a pause and examine our values.

Hold Fast to Love.

Look up at the stars again, feel small, and part of something way bigger than yourself.

Amen.
