

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
 “For the Sake of the Gospel”
 February 25, 2018
 Lent 2B 2018
 Mark 8:31-38

It’s a challenging week when the Gospel reading ends with Jesus promising to be ashamed of us.

There is obviously more to the reading than that—and, at this point, I’ve preached on it many times—and never found it easy. “Deny yourselves. Take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you’ll lose it. If you lose your life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, you’ll save it.

Mark Twain gives a helpful perspective for tough words like these: “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I *do* understand.”

What I do understand—what I think is crystal clear—is how serious the business of following Jesus is. Being a disciple, following Jesus is not a hobby.

There are places now where following Jesus—openly being a Christian—means risking your life. And there were times when that was true everywhere. But we don’t live in a time or a place where it is so risky to be a Christian. It’s not dangerous for us to be here today.

So, I think it takes reflecting and struggling to get some idea of what this means for us, right now, right here.

There’s a lot in these words of Jesus, but what I’m going to focus on is this: “What does it mean to lose your life for the sake of the Gospel?”

I find it impossible to avoid struggling with this question in light of that God-awful school shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglass High School. It’s interesting to me that we all know that name—it’s been seared in my mind.

Something that wasn’t true on Ash Wednesday—the day it happened. I have such a regret about that day because—even though we changed the prayers for our evening service, I didn’t change the homily. I’m sorry to say that I did not even think about changing it. And as I’ve been reflecting on why, I think it’s because—as horrible as it was—it seemed like one more piece of very bad news.

I’m seeing it quite differently now. This story gives us some idea of what Jesus is talking about when he talks about losing our lives for the sake of the Gospel. I’m not actually connecting his words with those who literally lost their lives—though I feel deep sadness and awe at the stories of educators giving their lives in order to save their students.

What’s got me are these students who have channeled their grief and their trauma into action—dozens of students at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School who are speaking their anguish and their anger—and who are not letting this tragedy become one more in a list that is already too long. They will not let this die—and they are the reason we are *more* not less focused on it 10 days later.

These are young people who have *lost* their former lives. Connor Dietrich is one. Ten days ago he was stressing about standardized tests and afternoon diving team practice. Now he’s a survivor of a mass shooting who lost a good friend, and whose brother lost his best friend. And instead of going to the funeral, he’s honoring his friend’s life by trying to get the Florida legislature to restrict access to guns.

If you haven't had a chance to listen to these students talk at length, I really encourage you to do so. It's unforgettable—they are so raw and so eloquent and so unstoppable.

Emma Gonzalez gives a picture of how they have lost their former typical-high-school-student lives. Instead of worrying about their AP Government test, they are studying to make sure that their arguments based on politics and political history are watertight. She says, "The students at this school have been having debates on guns for what feels like our entire lives. . . Some discussions on the subject even occurred during the shooting while students were hiding in the closets."

You can hear in Alfonso Calderon's words just how completely his and other students' lives have changed: "This matters to me more than anything else in my entire life. And I want everybody to know, personally, I'm prepared to drop out of school. I'm prepared to not worry about anything besides this...I know everyone else here will fight for the rest of their lives to see sensible gun laws in this country, so that kids don't have to fear going back to school."

They have lost their former high-school-student lives. They have new lives that—in the midst of their heartbreaking pain—are filled with meaning and purpose and community.

But have they lost their lives *for the sake of the Gospel*?

Which begs a second really important question: *what is the Gospel*?

I think it's a harder question than you might at first think. Because really important people—inspired-by-the-Holy-Spirit kind of people—come to different conclusions.

Martin Luther—whose deepest understandings of what the Gospel is come from Paul—says the Gospel is the certainty that God loves us and forgives us—that, in Jesus, in his life, on the cross and in his resurrection, God has bridged any distance in our relationship.

This was not the prevailing understanding of his day—and Luther lost his life—in the sense of his position, his standing in the church. And for a time, he was a fugitive—albeit one with friends in high places, so he hid in a castle. But he was willing to give up his former life—and even his actual life—because he saw the Gospel as a matter of life and death.

I am so thankful for this understanding of the Gospel—for the good news that God loves us no matter what—it is the rock upon which my life is built.

But it's not the *whole* story of what God is about. Or what the Gospel is.

The Gospel writer Mark has a different understanding. And Mark is actually the one who coined the word, gospel. This is the very first verse: "The beginning of the good news (or gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Certainly, the cross is central in Mark—the whole second half of the book is about Jesus's journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

But the good news—the Gospel—that Jesus came to proclaim was about the *Kingdom of God*. This is just 13 verses later: Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The good news—the Gospel—is the announcement that that Kingdom of God is near. And then, in his ministry, Jesus gives a picture of what that looks like. People are healed. People are fed. People are brought into community. The Kingdom of God—God's reign—God's term in office—is about the world being full of the abundant, peace-ful and justice-ful life that God wants for all of us on this planet.

So, if we go back to the question of whether these students are losing their lives *for the sake of the Gospel*, I would say a whole-hearted YES. By trying to make sure their school shooting is the last one, they are aligning their lives with the Kingdom of God. I don't think it is always easy to say this or that action is in line with God's will but in this case, it's *not* hard to say that God does not want any more school shootings.

I don't know how many of these students are Christian but that doesn't mean they can't lose their lives for the sake of the Gospel. God's kingdom breaks in in mysterious ways. And I am so thankful to be living in this moment when we get to see the Kingdom of God coming near—breaking in, shaking things up and giving us a chance to be a part of what God is doing right now.

I desperately hope these instruments of God are successful in making real changes in our gun-worshipping society. *But even if this effort fails*, we have still witnessed a powerful inbreaking of God's rule.

Emma, Connor, Alfonso and countless others have cut through the disconnection that marks so much of our lives now. They have cut through everything that puts anything other than the well-being of all at the center—and that's what the Kingdom of God looks like.

These students have lost their former tranquil lives because of violence and the disconnection and separation that we call sin. That was not their choice.

But since that horrible day, they have gone on a chosen path of losing their lives. The way they have chosen to attend to their own grief—in this moment—is to pour their lives into proclaiming the good news that we *need* to stop this gun violence and that *we can*.

Jesus says, “. . .those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

And the lives of many others.

The kingdom of God is near.

Thanks be to God. Amen.