

“BEARING THE CROSS”

Mark 8:31-38 February 25, 2018

As I was researching information related to today’s message, I came across this “United Methodist Lent Quiz.” Since this is Lent and we are United Methodists, I thought I’d try out a couple of questions on you. Don’t worry-they are multiple choice!

1. What does the term ‘Lent,’ which comes from ‘lencten,’ mean?
The correct answer is spring.
2. How were ashes imposed in the early church?
Ashes were poured or sprinkled over the head.
3. Why do people give things up for Lent?
The correct answer is all of the above.
4. What snack food has significance during Lent?
The correct answer is pretzels.
5. Many people fast during Lent. How often did John Wesley fast?
Twice a week.
6. Why does Lent last 40 days?
To represent the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, tempted by Satan.
7. What do some United Methodists not sing at Lent?
Alleluia.
8. Which hymn, based on St. Patrick’s prayer, would be a good Lenten devotion?
“Christ Beside Me”
9. True or False? Sundays are not counted in the 40 days of Lent.
True
10. When early Methodists in America sat in a church on a mourner’s bench, they would:
All of the above.

Some congregations have the tradition of omitting the word *Alleluia* during Lent. It is to remind us of the Lord’s suffering and death during these solemn days. Taking this to heart, six-year-old Emma came home from school one day during Lent and told her mom that she had heard a boy say the “A”

word! Only later did her mom find out what the boy had said was “Alleluia!”

In our observance of Lent this year I would like to suggest that we bury the word “Alleluia.” We won’t use it until we meet on Easter Sunday. Living Lent daily means that we do take the Lord’s journey to the cross very seriously. Our sin helped put him on Calvary. If he did not have to die for us, why in the world is he hanging on a cross? Once again we focus on the result of Christ’s death and resurrection: that our God rules and reigns for all people. And That indeed will be a powerful reason to use the “A” word over and over again on Easter!

Last week in our first message for Lent we were in the wilderness with Jesus as the beginning of this series titled REHAB. Today we look at INTERVENTION. As we talked about last week, lots of times people do not go to rehab willingly. Although there are exceptions, most of the time intervention is required.

Taylor Burton-Edwards speaks of Cardiac Rehab, take two. He writes: I’ll talk about take one in a future side-bar. (He writes for Discipleship Ministries for the United Methodist Church as a consultant for Preaching.) Here I’ll just note that because I’d done Take One about a month earlier, I had some idea what to expect the experience to be. And that was, in general, a helpful thing.

The primary thing I knew is I could absolutely trust the staff both to keep me progressing and to watch out for me.

I knew this was something I had to do. My heart attack in April had left me weak, with little endurance, and slow, both physically and mentally. I had already become slower because of the progress of arthritis, another familiar inheritance. Having lost about thirty pounds since January had helped the arthritis some, but I had another thirty to go to get into the recommended BMI range for

my height, and the heart attack set my mobility back further. It was like I hadn't lost the first thirty. I didn't expect more regular cardiac exercise to hasten my weight loss (and, as it turned out it didn't). But I did hope that it might improve mobility as diet managed weight loss (and it did).

So I began anew in late May. Take one hadn't counted. It really was beginning again.

Stretching (10 minutes), six minutes of fast walking laps around the main gym, four minutes on an arm machine, six on a bike with no resistance, six on a bike/arms workout machine with minimal resistance, and blood pressure checks before and after. That's where it would start from the new Day 1. I understood it would build from there. The good thing was I got through the new Day 1 without incident. And then Day 2, the next day, and Day 3 starting Tuesday the next week, a day that began (as I learned Tuesdays always would) with an education session and a brief walk instead of the usual ten-minute stretch.

I was getting through it, with helpful support from the nursing and training staff, and some sense of collegiality from the many others (all but one at least twenty years older than I) who were in the class.

After three weeks, as the time, resistance, and goals for the machinery were gradually amped up, I changed the order of my workout. I found the bike/arms machine was the hardest thing I faced each time, the equipment that left me the most exhausted. So I decided to do it first, and then arrange the other pieces as a sort of extended cooldown from that. I could psych myself up during the warm up (or education and walk) for that, and...push it at the max to meet or exceed the stated average watts goal, then simply get through the rest of it. This was the one I felt I needed to master, because it was the one that seemed to have

the greatest chance to master me.

Cardiac rehab three times a week became my new normal. And because of my travel and work schedule this summer, once I was released back to work, it would become my new normal for just over five months. Arrive. Record morning weight and wait for blood pressure check. Put on pouch and monitor. Stretch. Bike/arms machine. Bike. Arms machine. Walk laps. Cool down. Take blood pressure. Report results after each machine or exercise. Over time, more resistance, longer walks, added weights, and added rowing machine. Day by day. Week by week. Month after month. Repeat.

I can't say I liked it. I liked and trusted the staff, completely. It was good to be with others doing the rehab and getting to know some of them along the way. But I did not enjoy the workout itself. At all. It was more like I was trying to get through Still, I can and do say my cardiac rehab completion certificate may be the most important certificate I have received in my life.

Sometimes, as in the case of Taylor, intervention came in the form of a health crisis. Taylor had a heart attack. He was very fortunate that he sought medical attention. He was fortunate that the attack was not worse. He was fortunate that his wife knew his family history and intervened.

Intervention may come in the form of a relationship crisis or an act of tough love. A family decides they can no longer tolerate the drinking, or the gambling, or the hoarding. The person involved in the struggle is causing harm to the people he loves. Life has spun out of control so much that others are forced to confront the person about his or her problem.

Intervention may come as an unwanted surprise: your company

downsizes, and you are forced to change jobs, or you become unemployed. A loved one is diagnosed with a major illness, and others have to adjust their lives in order to provide care. Retirement finally comes, but even a lifetime of working has not earned enough to provide full financial freedom. Your tour of duty comes to an end and you return home, not the same person as you were before because of what you experienced or witnessed.

In the case of the opioid crisis, part of the problem is that people don't know what to do to intervene. Addiction to painkillers, be they prescription or street drugs, is physical. Most people struggling with this problem cannot simply choose to stop using. Stopping the drugs causes extreme physical illness. Other drugs are needed to get through the wilderness of opioid addiction. Maintenance medication may need to be part of the permanent solution. Because this particular crisis knows no social, cultural, or economic boundaries, many people who have a child or parent or grandparent who is addicted feel ashamed and isolated, and they may be reluctant to seek support from friends, neighbors, and brothers and sisters in Christ.

But then, nobody said it was going to be easy.

In this harsh exchange between Jesus and Peter, it's almost as if Jesus was saying, "Dude, you need rehab!!" This is an act of intervention, and it's not pretty.

What had Peter done that required intervention?

In the verses that immediately precede Jesus' rebuke of him, Peter has proclaimed his belief that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the one sent from God to save God's people. Jesus then goes on to teach his disciples, and everyone present in the crowd, what this means.

It means he will die, and then three days later, God will raise him from the dead.

In other words, Jesus teaches that not only he, but anyone who wants to follow him, must understand where the path leads. It leads to and through sacrificial living. It leads to suffering. It leads to the cross. And let us be clear that Jesus isn't the only one who will be required to make a sacrifice. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" (Mark 8:35-37, NRSV).

Rehab is a journey into a very hard place. It is about taking up the cross. It is about denying yourself. It is about following a leader or a program or a Savior into the hard place of suffering, rejection, and even death. Rehab requires that we give up control for the time being and let someone else tell us what to do.

Intervention is a hard step for people to take. Jesus comes across here like a teacher humiliating a student. While Peter spoke privately to Jesus when he rebuked him, Jesus publically puts Peter behind him and speaks to the crowd, using him as his example. It is humiliating.

Likewise, it may be publically humiliating to go to rehab. It may be hard to confess your sin and ask for help. It is humbling to admit that you can't fix it on your own, that the disease or the evil has gained control over you, and that you need intervention to get out from underneath the weight of your problem. But no matter what difficulties we face, after taking the first step—admitting we have a problem—we have to take the second step of entering

into a time of pain and suffering. The only way to survive is to take a deep breath, trust in the people who love us and in the healing power of grace, and walk bravely into the depths of despair, whatever it may be.

If we try to preserve ourselves, by ignoring or denying that we have a problem, be it with our heart, or with drugs, or with alcohol, or with sex, or food, or PTSD, or whatever it is from which we need to recover, then we risk death. We risk not just physical death, but spiritual death as well.

Being a follower of Jesus means that we bravely head into the storms that life sends our way. It means we walk into the suffering that life brings, not just to us, but to others. And if we aren't following Jesus into the path that leads to suffering, then we are heading in the wrong direction.

Being a Christian is not a magic pill that we can take in order to avoid the suffering that is part of life. Following Jesus is very hard sometimes. We might want to respond like Peter and deny that the way of Jesus is the way of arrest, the way of suffering, the way of rejection, and the way of death. That's the reality of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, and none of us will survive if we don't first take on the reality that's where we are going.

The good news is that we know when we are in Christ, pain and suffering, evil and death, no longer have dominion over us. We know that on the other side of the pain and the suffering of rehab is the promise of resurrection. Jesus promises that when we willingly give up our lives, do whatever it takes, even suffer and die, it is through this path that we will find eternal healing and life everlasting.

The good news is that no matter how difficult the journey gets, we do not walk into our suffering and our pain alone. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ goes with us. The Spirit goes with us through the hands of doctors and

nurses, physical therapists, psychologists, sponsors, and family and friends. Christ goes with us, just as he went ahead of Peter. He leads the way through the storms and through difficult nights. He leads us like a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. He leads us on paths of righteousness for his name's sake. So, though we may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we don't have to fear evil, because God is with us. God's rod and staff, they comfort us on the journey. Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forevermore (Psalm 23 paraphrased.)