

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Second Sunday in Lent – February 25, 2018

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 8:31-38

FOR REFLECTION

"In true dialogue, both sides are willing to change."

~ Thích Nhất Hạnh (b.1926) Vietnamese Buddhist monk,
teacher, author, poet and peace activist

Dialogue of the Deaf

Last week I heard an interview on KPCC/NPR – it may have been about international diplomacy, it may have been about the NRA. And a phrase popped out at me: "It's like a dialogue of the deaf." That was a metaphor worth saving.

I am fully aware that people who ARE deaf can communicate perfectly well. With sign language, lip-reading and an uncanny ability to read body language, most people who have no physical ability to hear, can carry on an excellent conversation. So please, understand that I am not referring to actual deaf people when I use this phrase.

There is a different kind of deafness which is voluntary. And this is where the metaphor works. A dialogue of the deaf in this context involves "not hearing the other person" – having mental filters or blocks that have been put in place to protect one's own point of view or status. A "dialogue of the deaf" is not "true dialogue" where "both sides are willing to change." It is not a dialogue at all; it is a series of monologues.

I came across this at Occidental College when I worked there as the Interfaith Coordinator / Campus Chaplain. At faculty meetings various professors would stand to address an issue – and each person's remarks had relatively no connection to the remarks of the previous person. It was not a discussion, it was grand-standing. They weren't hearing each other, they were speechifying. It was a "dialogue of the deaf."

I've been witness to and even participated in supposed dialogues between Progressive Christians and Fundamentalist Christians. No true dialogue there; both have claims to Truth with a capital "T."

Much of the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the same – two parties who claim victimhood – neither one willing to change – neither one really hearing each other. True "dialogue of the deaf."

Mark's gospel has been written with numerous instances of "deaf dialogues" between Jesus and others – particularly between Jesus and his disciples. And, yes, I'll say that Mark's Jesus isn't particularly willing to hear what his disciples are telling him – in addition to the fact that the disciples just aren't hearing or even wanting to hear, let alone comprehend what he's saying.

Keep in mind that this is Mark's interpretation of who Jesus was – he uses literary devices to make a point. Our text this morning is the first of 3 prophetic statements by Jesus, followed by 3 occasions of incomprehension or misinterpretation by the disciples. I'll line them up here:

Mark 8:31-33

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

Mark 9:31-32

31 ...for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Mark 10:33ff

33 ...'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; 34 they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' 36 And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' 37 And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' 38 But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking...'

Mark has Jesus prophesying his own torture, death and resurrection. This Jesus is fully aware of the future and is proclaiming, not dialoguing. Mark's disciples are terrified, not wanting to believe this will happen, fighting off the scenario, trying to make deals that will make it palatable. Jesus is unwilling to give any ground to their fears – to hear them, soften his position, compromise in any way. And, from Mark's point of view, Jesus had the higher ground. The disciples were pretty much bumbling idiots.

Now: Guess who Mark's audience is supposed to relate to?

Now: Guess who some of us self-righteous Christians think we take after?

And now: Are we even capable of understanding our own lack of comprehension, adjusting our attitudes, and humbling ourselves in relationship to the incomprehensible Higher Power / G-d we believe in? Are we willing to hear the uncomfortable points of view of the victims of our way of life?

The main reason our government is in such deplorable condition right now is because Democrats and Republicans are in a heated "dialogue of the deaf." There is no hearing of one another and no willingness to change. Our children are now pounding on the walls of that chosen deafness, begging someone to hear them. And you can see on the faces of some of our elected officials the contorted efforts they are going through – to appear as if they are listening – but are actually blocking out the sounds of our kids' voices.

When 45 was meeting with survivors of school shootings this week, a photographer took a photo of the discussion notes in 45's hand. There were 4 talking points and #5 read "I hear you." He needed a note to remind him to tell these survivors that he heard them – especially in light of the fact he couldn't or wouldn't hear them. I don't know what he thought he was doing – dialogue or listening session – but it was neither.

It is said that "money talks" – a truth understood by our Parkland kids. They've organized a social media campaign to boycott companies that give perks to NRA members. Companies have begun to terminate their relationships with the NRA. Perhaps our "corporate persons" have heard a language they understand. Our kids are brilliant.

And I mean that. Not just the Parkland kids, but kids all over this planet. And not just kids generally, but our kids specifically. The kids in this room and the next, the kids who live in our houses and go to our schools. Our kids are brilliant. They understand this world in ways we never will – because they were raised in it. We weren't.

There is a photo of the Parkland kids meeting in someone's living room, sitting on the floor, all of them on their phones. But they are not deaf to each other or the adults or their context. They are organizing a transformation of the world – together – in their own 2018 way. Damn smart.

True dialogue demands a willingness to change – on all sides.

May we ALL open our ears and actually listen to what's going on.

Our actions will speak louder than words –

especially hypocritical, now empty words like "thoughts and prayers."

May our actions, backing up our prayers, reach G-d's listening ears.

Mark 8:31-38

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

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. 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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."