

Mark 8:31-38 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

## Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

<sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>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."

<sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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,<sup>[a]</sup> will save it. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words<sup>[b]</sup> 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."

**February 18, 2018**

**Mark 8:31-38**

**“It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World”**

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*“It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World”* was my grandfather’s favorite movie.

Though I’ve never seen the whole picture myself, I can remember walking into his living room when he was laughing fully out loud at some scene he’d probably watched dozens of times before. The title has always intrigued me so I looked up some things about the movie this week and the impact it has had since its release in 1963. First off, it was the first big budget comedy of its kind. Not only was it a chase movie about recovering \$350,000 that a thief had hidden under a big “W” in Los Angeles, it was a movie that involved almost every comedic actor of its time, and surely cost more to make than the \$350,000 all the characters were searching to find. Everyone wanted to be in it – and many of the names are even recognizable today – Milton Berle, Micky Rooney, Ethel Merman, and the three stooges even had a cameo appearance. Judging by my grandfather’s reaction to the film, it most certainly was laugh out loud funny.

But even as it can be lauded as the first big budget Hollywood comedy, comedies have been around for centuries, for millennia really. The ancient Greeks

had comedic plays which had elements of political satire and irony, but they also laughed out loud at bathroom humor and sex jokes. As their genre developed, Greek comedy even had early precursors to the American sitcom, as the humor revolved around family life and the sticky situations we get ourselves into at home. So, in case you are wondering, is there humor in the Bible? The answer is a resounding, YES! Yes, there are parts of scripture that are meant to be funny, but unfortunately, even as we explore the same kinds of themes in comedy over and over again, the cultural context of our time and place changes, and we lose the necessary background it takes to understand the jokes. Abraham laughs at the promise of starting a family in his 90s, but I dare say it was probably Sarah who laughed the loudest. We get why that is funny. But something like reading the book of Esther slips by us. It is filled with hyperbole and intended to be over the top ridiculous. Really, it is. And given that the Jewish celebration of Purim associated with the book of Esther is coming up this week, it helps to know that the celebration of that story continues routinely with costume parties – perhaps because Esther hid her identity from the King – but it is also part of the tradition that you come to Purim dressed up like someone else to the point at which you can't tell Mordecai from Haman, which means until you can't tell the good guy in

the story from the bad. Comedy is like that – silly and unpredictable, and you don't know if it's going to turn out well or badly until you get to the very end.

Jesus also was no stranger to humor. His statement about a rich person getting into heaven being like a camel going through the eye of a needle has been analyzed to death, but maybe it was just supposed to be a ridiculous mental image to make his point. He made ironic statements all the time in his parables and stories. You think you know where he's going, but there is bound to be a twist at the end. When he's telling a story, we see the predictable parts, that the priest and Levite are getting it wrong by walking by the man left beside the Jericho road. But then the punch line hits – and no one wants to root for the Samaritan to get it right.

We human beings are made to love comedy. As CS Lewis and others have suggested, only the devil doesn't laugh. It is telling though that many of our best cultural comics struggle with darkness and depression. Sometimes the best comedy is born out of seeing the most difficult side of life. We are living in anxious times, and in times of great anxiety, folks are looking for escape – which means that some will simply drop out or grow numb or cold. But I give thanks for the comedians. They give us the permission to diffuse our anxiety by helping us

look on the absurd side of life. They engage the pain of our world, not by ramping it up, but by pointing out how ludicrous it really is. George Carlin, of course, was a great political satirist because he was frustrated by absolutely everything he thought was wrong in the world. Therefore, comics like Carlin and some of our current political satirists in late night television are sometimes rebuked for their humor. It strikes a nerve, hits too close to home, lets the Emperor know that he isn't wearing any clothes, and then the funny man or funny woman isn't so funny anymore if you stand to lose power or position from their well-timed jabs.

That's why I've always liked the title – especially – of my grandfather's favorite movie. It is, after all, a mad, mad, mad, mad world that we live in. And I have been lucky to grow up knowing, from family and from my church, that taking life too seriously was a really bad way to go. I had the great advantage of listening to pastors who liked having a captive audience and went for the laugh, who repeatedly told me about the flaws in biblical characters, how the heroes and heroines of scripture were just real people like you and me. That wasn't the case for some of my friends who attended other churches and were expected to take everything as a matter of life and death, because you could slip up when it came to thinking something serious was funny and trade your ticket to heaven for one destined for hell. Some of those communities were obsessed with getting

everything right in such serious and joyless ways – when I knew I could laugh like mad at my grandmother for passing gas in an elevator. We always joked that she got to the second floor quicker that day!

Humor was an essential part of my growing up years, and it helps me to see how Jesus, in his most serious of serious moments was proclaiming the truth in absurdities. Jesus invites us into his kind of madness – precisely because the world around him was filled with the intolerable madness of greed and power. The disciples were often confused by his teaching. He told them that he would have to undergo suffering and death, and Peter was the first to tell him to snap out of it. He wasn't acting like a Messiah should act. He wasn't a conquering hero. He wasn't going to snap his fingers and make the world a better place tomorrow. He didn't even have 5 steps to a better life to help him get a good book deal. These are worldly things, Jesus says. The madness of our times. He says, I'm going to help you set your mind on divine things. And then he told his disciples that taking life too seriously, holding on to the status quo too tightly would only lead to loss. It was in losing life, and in the *loosing* of life, that you would find the gift, that you would know salvation and wholeness. That's certainly not how the world works. That's certainly not how the Roman state saw things. That's certainly not what the religious establishment wanted him to be preaching. Talking about his

own death was a twist, an irony, a madness. The disciples were falling all over themselves to get to the reward at the end, and Jesus was telling them that it had been with them all along. And the secret isn't in finding it, it's in letting go.

The news cycles these days are depressing, horrifying, and altogether deadly serious. I could begin a list here and now, but might not be able to get to the end of all the things that are causing us anxiety and grief. It's overwhelming. I know. I feel it in my bones. But getting stuck in our anxiety and depression won't do us any good. In counseling my own child about worry – I told her that a little bit of worry is OK, it helps us to do the kind of things that will protect us like checking the batteries in our fire detectors and washing our hands before we eat. But a lot of worry can keep us locked up and prevent us from living the abundant life that is meant for us to enjoy. And remember, Jesus promises us the abundant life, not riches and fame, but rather the eyes to see that life itself is a precious gift. In John's gospel, he says, "I came that they may have life and have it in abundance," even at the same time here he bids us not to worry so much about hoarding that life that we were given. Be free with it. Give it away. Laugh often. I must tell you, I want to always be able to laugh like my grandfather laughed at his favorite movie. It made me want to see comedies with him, and even as a teenager, I remember the time we went to see Bill Murray's awesome comedy,

“What about Bob?” He laughed pretty hard in that one too, and I didn’t even care when people turned around to look where the laughter was coming from.

So maybe we need laughter now more than ever. Maybe we need to not get so tangled up in the seriousness that we forget that life is meant to be a gift. Sometimes, I confess, I feel guilty in the midst of such tragedy going on in the world when my life is rather joyful. I have so much to be thankful for. But engaging the world in all its madness isn’t helpful. Jesus asks a good question, “What will it benefit you to gain the whole world if you lose your life in the process?” Here’s the deal. It’s going to be a mad world out there – caught up in power, and greed, and seriousness. So instead, join Jesus in his kind of absurdity that says that only a life worth losing will be the life saved, for the sake of the gospel. Amen.