

Lent 2B

Are you a morning person or a late-night person? Do you make phone calls to people or do you prefer to send a text message? Do you eat a dinner at night, or is it a supper at your house? Do you root for the Habs or the Maple Leafs? How about following rules? Are you a rules person, or one who likes to break the rules?

The 8th chapter of the Gospel of Mark is a clear break in the rules of the story, and Peter, who is a rules person, does not want the story to change. Jesus and his disciples have been moving about in the Galilean country side and it has been wonderful, healing the sick, reaching out to the poor, building community and bringing people together. Everything has gone according to the rules up until this moment. With today's reading you just heard, the rules of the game change. Jesus says that he will undergo suffering and that he will die. Peter pulls Jesus aside to remind him of the rules. "Enough of the suffering and death stuff", he says, "that is not how the game is played." And then Jesus says to all of their surprise, "any who want to follow me must deny themselves and take up their cross. For those who want to save their lives will lose it and, and those who would lose their life for my sake will save it." The rules have changed.

Millard Fuller was the founder of Habitat for Humanity, the remarkable program for housing for the homeless that spread across the globe. In 1965 Millard was a rules person. He was a hardworking NY executive, putting in 100-hour work weeks, making the unheard sum of 1 million dollars a year. He had climbed every possible ladder. From the outside, he was playing by the rules, but on the inside he was dying. His life was crumbling around him. His children didn't know who he was. He had lost his soul. One evening his wife announced she was leaving. It was as if his life had become a clenched fist. He was clinging so hard to something that he thought he wanted, the things that really mattered in his life had slipped right through his grasp. In a desperate attempt to put his life back together he piled his wife and children in the car and drove down to Americus, Georgia to meet with some friends who had recently joined Koinonia farms, a community where rich and poor and black and white lived together in the still segregated south, breaking all the conventional rules. He met Clarence Jordan, founder of the community, who listened to Fuller's pain and splintered life, and suggested that a million dollars a year is an awful burden to carry. Fuller stayed for a month, saw what was happening in Americus, began reading the Bible, and caught a new vision. Putting his remarkable business savvy to work, he started Habitat for Humanity and the rest is history. Like Peter, he was a rules person, playing by the rules, only to discover the rules were about to change. He had to lose his life to save it.

Most of us are rules people. We play by the rules. The only way we end up living in nice neighbourhoods and lovely homes is to play by the rules, and there are all kinds of rules, most of the unspoken. There are generational rules. There are rules that come by virtue of social location. There are rules about business. And most of the rules that we conform to have as their foundation, a firm principle, which is this: we belong to ourselves. We are the author of our own destinies. And so, the rules that run our lives have much to do with managing, grabbing,

reaching, and climbing, and most of all, achieving. And when the rules change, when life becomes not about what we can do for ourselves, but about what God has done in Christ on our behalf, it can be, as Peter discovered, terrifying.

Years ago I spent a week in Lintula Convent in eastern Finland. There the sisters live by a different set of rules that I was used to. It is an old Orthodox rule and it was written 1500 years ago. It is short, and can be read over a cup of tea. The rule is prayer, obedience, work, rest and community. At the heart of that rule is the assumption that life is not to be achieved, it is to be received. Life is not to be made; life is a gift that is offered through the life of Christ.

There are two sets of rules: rules of achieving and rules of receiving. The difference is what Millard Fuller discovered. It is the difference between living as a clenched fist, and receiving life with an open hand. A fist can do many things. A fist can grasp and climb. A fist can hammer a nail and a fist can lash out in anger. A fist can be defiant, strong and forceful. But a fist can never hold another's hand. A fist can achieve, but a fist can never receive.

Peter is playing by the rule of fist. Millard Fuller was playing by the rule of fist. Many of us are. Are you, what do you think?

And Jesus says about the rule of the fist, the rule of grasping and achieving and striving, if you play by those rules, you might just beat yourself to death. If you want to live, truly live, you must first die, and then open your hands, and receive. Only by losing our lives, can they be saved.

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. The story of Lent is the journey from clenched fist to open hand. The clenched fist of anxious Peter to the open hands of Mary. The clenched and vengeful fist of Pontius Pilate and the crowds to the open hands of Jesus. Taking Lent seriously means releasing our grasp on our lives so that we can receive and embrace a new life.

You may think the cost of following Jesus is just too much. Denying yourself, taking up the cross, losing your life for the sake of the gospel, may just feel beyond you, reserved for the Millard Fullers of the world.

But that may not be true. When you feel you have lost your way, when something outside of your control has plunged you into the dark, and you can't seem to find your way to any life at all, God will find your life for you. When you are terrified and confused, when the rules have changed and the ground has shifted underneath, God does what you cannot do. Christ loses his life, in order to give you life.

"You must lose your life in order to save it" says Jesus. At the end, it is not your own life that you lose, as much of the life you have been given. The cross is not the heavy burden that we bear, but the one Jesus bears on our behalf. Perhaps giving up ourselves, and the rules of the fist, we might have room to open our hands and receive the grace that is everywhere.

How do you want to live your life? What do you desire the scene that gathers up all the other scenes of your life to look like? A fist? Grabbing and clinging to whatever anger and bitterness and hurt and regret and fear and achievement that may be on your mind?

Or will your life and the main scene be as an open hand?

Lent is a perfect time to let go and receive the true life that is Christ alone.

Amen.