

Mark 8:31-38  
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Invitation to Life

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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."

In a sermon a while back I told my own childhood story of school violence. On September 15, 1959, a man set off a bomb at Edgar Allen Poe elementary school in Houston, killing three adults and three children—including himself and his son—and injuring another twenty children. I was in my sixth grade class when the bomb exploded; my younger sister Pat and brother Stevo were also at school that day. We were very fortunate, indeed, to escape unharmed.

The force of the bomb was so great that it broke windows a half-mile away. Countless lives would have been lost without the clear-headed response of Mrs. Doty, the principal, who led the man out of the building from her office, and the teachers who got the children off of the playground.

I remember the terror of looking for my siblings, the relief we all felt when we were together again, safe at home. It was a life-changing event for our family because it made abundantly clear what mattered most in our lives was simply that: being together and safe.

In the wake of the tragedy, cruel, idle phone threats were made against a couple of schools as happened this week at Orono and in other cities and towns around the country. In Houston in those days, people soon realized that the Poe School bombing was the unique action of a deranged man—not to be repeated. We had nothing to fear.

How far we have come from those innocent days.

Now no one is safe from random gun violence anywhere in the United States of America: not in church, not in school, not at a concert, not at a mall, not on the street, and not at home—not even in the town that was known as the safest place in Florida. Virtually anybody, virtually anywhere in this country can purchase or transport enough gun power to annihilate scores of people in a matter of minutes. You all have seen the stupefying and shameful statistics comparing gunshot deaths here and in other countries.

We're number 1 by miles.

And it is so hard not to despair to the point of numb helplessness when yet another such tragedy occurs and national and state legislators ignore the will of the majorities who have long supported common sense limitations on the availability of weapons.

One bloody horror blurs into the next.

But for this Christian, the Ash Wednesday massacre at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School stands out, unforgettably etched in memory with the photo of the weeping woman whose forehead is still marked with the cross. "Remember that you are dust..."

Thank God for the children and the parents from Parkland who are speaking truth to power—eloquently, insistently and passionately--refusing to be satisfied with thoughts and prayers that don't translate into action. In so doing they honor the activist legacy of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas herself.

Born in Minneapolis in 1890, Ms. Douglas was a journalist and conservationist who is best known for her defense of the Everglades as a precious habitat rather than a worthless swamp. Author of the highly-influential book *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1947), she became known as the Grande Dame of the Everglades for her tireless work for the preservation of South Florida until her death at 108. She wrote:

*Be a nuisance where it counts. Do your part to inform and stimulate the public to join your action. Be depressed, discouraged, and disappointed at failure and the disheartening effects of ignorance, greed, corruption and bad politics—but never give up.*

Let us join in support the people fearlessly standing up against gun violence with our voices, our calls, our letters, our presence and our votes. Let us work AND pray to make this the turning point.

The Poe School bombing so long ago had one thing in common with the shootings at Sandy Hook, in Parkland, and many other places. In each of them, people made the split-second decision to lose their life for the sake of another's. In Parkland they were teachers and coaches and fifteen-year-old student Anthony Borges who barricaded his classroom door with his own body. At Poe, it was the janitor, Mr. James Montgomery. He stepped in front of Mrs. Doty to shield her from the blast. She was badly injured but survived because of his sacrifice.

Although I have no idea about the religious practice of these individuals, I know that their deaths were heroic examples of the highest ideals of our faith.

Those of you who have served in the armed forces are schooled for such sacrifice. The risk is part of the job. Now that the risk is universal in this land, every one of us should to imagine how we would want to respond in a shooting incident. School employees everywhere have. Like Robert Parish, teacher at Broadview Elementary

School in Parkland, who was quoted in the *Star Tribune* last week: "Last night I told my wife I would take a bullet for the kids."

I wonder about his wife's response. Did she accept it with a mixture of sadness, resignation and pride? Or did she react like Peter—rebuking her husband, in shock, as Peter did when Jesus first predicted his death? The analogy isn't perfect. But I'm suggesting we sympathize with Peter's horrified rejection of the idea that his rabbi, his teacher, the Messiah would willingly suffer and die unjustly.

Jesus' reply to Peter is breathtaking. Nowhere else in the gospels does he speak that harshly. Remember that Mark interprets Jesus' story as a cosmic battle between God and Satan. However innocent, Peter's words deterring Jesus from his God-given purpose aligned Peter with Satan, putting him in diabolical opposition to the will of God.

It was a teaching moment. At this stage in their common journey, Jesus wanted all the disciples to understand that nothing, no one could stand in the way of his commitment to God's mission for him.

Jesus also needed for them clearly to grasp the cost of their own commitment as his followers. The price of discipleship was nothing less than life itself. God wanted them to give themselves completely to the work: body, soul, and mind. Their commitment might well end with the most ignoble and gruesome death imaginable: crucifixion.

Despite that horrible threat, and the thousands of martyrs whose deaths bore it out, within three centuries after Jesus' death there were 5-6 million Christians in the Roman Empire. Their very numbers probably led to Constantine's acceptance of the faith in 312.

Why did they convert? Why on earth take the risk? Apparently they had found a life worth dying for and worth LIVING for. They had embraced the paradox of losing their lives in order to find them in relationship with God and in communities of meaning, inclusion, love, and service.

Christians today are persecuted and killed for their faith today in countries like North Korea, Somalia and Afghanistan, still prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the gospel.

Few if any of us here will be called to do so. But every one of us is invited to lay down our narrow, self-centered lives, our shallow, worldly values along with our fears of failure, of not being enough, of not having enough. Sooner or later that life will disappoint us. Jesus offers us the chance to lay it down, to embrace the unconditional love that God has for each of us, and to live into the grace of sharing that inexhaustible bounty of love with those around us.

Following Jesus has its own struggles, of course. There's the continual battle against the call of materialism, individuality, the illusion that we are in control of

things. The rewards are inestimable including revelatory moments of self knowledge and acceptance, trust, hearing and speaking the truth in love, along with depths of love and peace surpassing understanding.

That **is** the life worth dying for, the one worth living for.