



rehab: Intervention

Mark 8:31-38

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

March 17, 2019

One of my favorite things about the ministry is celebrating with couples as they prepare for, and as they enter into, a marriage covenant. There are few things more exciting than finding the person you want to spend your life with, and making that claim publicly with an array of family, friends, mentors, and co-workers. In the year leading up to the wedding, I spend some dedicated time with every couple in pre-marital counseling. It's a time for the couple to sure up their relationship, to answer some of the hard questions that many couples forgo discussing, and to ensure their marriage is built on a solid foundation. I'm grateful to be walking with five couples in preparation for their weddings right now with two weddings in April, a couple later this year, and one in 2020.

In one of our sessions we focus exclusively on communication. A necessary component for a strong relationship is healthy communication. We focus on what defines healthy communication, and look at the places where poor communication is most likely to occur. While we focus on how to maintain good communicative practices, I have found that every relationship has ebbs and flows in this regard. There are always days, and often seasons, where communication is difficult. In the midst of this conversation on communication, on question I always ask is, "Are you willing to seek a counselor if communication falls apart? What's the threshold that would necessitate a counselor for you?"

In some ways, I want to make sure the couple doesn't think that every day of their marital life is going to be a walk in the park. The honeymoon will end. But more importantly, I want to know, are you open to an intervention.

Whether it's in the midst of a season of struggle as a couple, or if in the midst of any season of brokenness as individuals, there are times when an intervention is needed. To get from a place of brokenness to reclaim wholeness, to enter into a season of rehabilitation, we often have to experience an intervention that calls attention to the brokenness that exists. And let's be honest, we don't always go into rehab willingly, sometimes an intervention is necessary.

Intervention can come in many different forms. It could come in the form of a heart attack, calling attention to the need for a change in diet, in exercise, or in our engagement in stress-creating activities. Intervention can come in the form of a car accident, drawing attention to our drinking problem. It could come in the form of a diagnosis, a lost job, an eviction, or a mental breakdown. Sometimes it comes in the form of a face-to-face confrontation. Interventions can be necessary when "life has spun out of control so much that others are forced to confront the person about his or her problem."ⁱ

After I had graduated from college, I received a call from the parents of a good friend. They invited me to come to their house to help address my friend regarding a drug habit. He had already been removed from college classes. He had little money, a low paying job, and was at the time living with his parents. I sat in their living room as they told him about the drugs they had found in his room. I was invited to be there as a support for him as they told him that if he chose not to quit the use of these drugs, he would be kicked out of the house. It was an intervention, and an invitation to rehab after a few years of drug use.

Intervening on someone else's behalf, calling attention to existing brokenness, highlighting a need for rehabilitation – these are not easy steps to take, but for personal, physical, emotional, and spiritual purposes, intervention is at times necessary. Today's Scriptural text offers us an example of such an intervention.

Jesus has been preaching and teaching for some time. He has fed the masses with just a few loaves of bread, and a couple of fish. He's healed people, and he's rebuked the wrongful teaching of Temple elders. In the story preceding this morning's text, Jesus has travelled up to Caesarea Philippi with the disciples. On their way up to the villages of this northern town, Jesus asks the disciples this question, "Who do people say that I am?" He wants to know, what's the word on the street? What are people saying about me? The disciples answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

Jesus follows up with a second question, "But who do *you* say that I am?" He makes it personal. Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

The disciples have finally figured out what we have known all along. This is a Titanic moment. You know what I mean? When you go to see a movie, like the Titanic, and as the boat is quietly heading for the iceberg, all you want to do is scream at the man in the navigation bridge, "Look out for the iceberg! It's right there! Why can't you see it! Come on, it's huge! Hard a-starboard! Come on, what's taking so long!" For readers of this text, Jesus' identity is made plain and clear in Mark chapter 1, verse 1, which reads, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, *the Son of God.*" We've known Jesus' identity all along; but here in chapter 8 is the first time one of the disciples is able to correctly name Jesus' identity. What took them so long?

In Mark's gospel, there's a sense of expediency. They story line take very little pause. No sooner has Peter named Jesus' identity as the Messiah than we get to today's text, which begins, "Then Jesus 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." It's almost as if Jesus is saying, "Finally, you understand who I am, now I can explain that in fuller detail."

With little pause or hesitation, now that the disciples have rightly identified Christ as the Messiah, Jesus lays it out plain and clear. "Jesus must suffer because his understanding of the will of God runs counter to that of the religious authorities: members of the governing council, officiants in the community's liturgical life, and authorized interpreters of scripture."ⁱⁱ It's not

just that Jesus will be crucified, died, and buried ... It's not just that his death will be overcome with resurrection ... it's that Jesus' death will be the result of the majority religious community failing to understand his identity. Also, in spite of the leaders of the religious community failing to understand God's will in Christ, God will still overcome this failure through resurrection.

To understand what happens next, we must first grasp the significance of Jesus' teaching here. Jesus isn't just offering a word of truth about his own identity, he's also naming a truth about the leaders of the faith to which he and all the disciples belong. Not only will the Messiah be killed, but his death will be at the request of the leaders of their own religious community. It was the Romans would carry out the sentence, but it was the religious leaders who would request it.

Peter, the very one who rightly named Jesus as the Messiah, takes Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Peter is rebuking Jesus.

Why does Peter rebuke him? What has Peter so upset?

On the one hand, it seems Peter, while understanding that Jesus *is* the Christ, does not understand what it means for Jesus to *be* the Christ. It's possible that Peter's rebuke of Jesus is solely predicated on the idea that Jesus, as the Messiah, must suffer. The Hebrew Scriptures and the stories of the prophets make it clear that the Israelites, throughout their time as God's covenant people, had longed for a warrior prince who would lead their armies to conquer any enemies of the state. It's quite possible that Peter still yearns for this type of Messiahship. Jesus had demonstrated the power to heal, and he had made food appear out of thin air, and with such miraculous powers, surely Jesus could lead a militaristic effort to conquer the Romans who had occupational power in the region. Much to Peter's displeasure, the proclamation is made that Jesus' reign as Messiah will be marked with death.

Just the same, it's also possible Peter was not comfortable with Jesus throwing the Temple elders under the bus. Peter, like the rest of the disciples, is a devout Jew. He grew up learning to respect the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes of the Temple. This group of Jewish leaders had full authority to interpret and teach the scriptures. For Jesus to say it would be at their hand that he would die was to say that they didn't actually understand God's Word. Jesus' statement of future events calls to question where authority resides for people of faith. Does the power to know God's will lay in the hands of our best scriptural interpreters? Does the ability to know God's desire reside solely among those who claim the most devout scriptural allegiance? Jesus' statement of future action indicts those who were believed to have the best ability to discern God's will. Here Jesus says the very ones who make the decisions for the church will fail to see Christ as God's Son, and they will be the ones who bring about the death of the Messiah.

It's also possible that Peter's response is a matter of self-protection. If Peter is to follow Jesus, to be among his closest 12 followers, and Jesus is to be killed by the temple leaders, is Peter's fate going to be similar? Is Peter's knee-jerk reaction against Christ's proclamation an attempt

at self-preservation? If Jesus is rejected by the Temple leaders, and Peter is a known acquaintance, will Peter still be accepted in his own community? In his own family?

For one reason, or maybe a combination of them all, Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. I don't think he expected Jesus' next response.

Having been pulled aside and rebuked in private, Jesus turns back to the rest of the disciples, reengaging the full gathering, and there he rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

The Greek word used in Mark's gospel for both Peter's rebuke of Jesus, and Jesus' rebuke of Peter, is the word *epitimaō* (ἐπιτιμάω). It's the same Greek word used in stories where Jesus was casting out demons from possessed individuals, or where Jesus calmed the devastating winds on the sea. Was Peter trying to cast out demons from Jesus? Demons he believed were causing Jesus to wrongly proclaim his own death? Was Jesus seeking to cast out demons from Peter? He does, after all, say "get behind me, Satan."

Even in the stories where Jesus does rebuke possessive demons, like in Mark 9 in the story of the possessed boy, Jesus is never rebuking the possessed person directly, but instead is rebuking the influence and inspiration of evil which led to their wrongful actions and words. Understood similarly, Jesus is not rebuking Peter directly – he's not calling Peter *Satan* – Jesus is rebuking the wrongful influence of Satan in Peter's rebuking of Jesus, where-in Peter thought his way, his understanding, his desires, his thoughts about right and wrong were better in line with God's will than Jesus' teaching.

This is the right place for an intervention – when we place our self-preservation and the preservation of our human institutions above the willingness to submit before the will of God. Intervention is necessary when our way of thinking, our desires, our thoughts about right and wrong come in direct contradiction with God's will as witnessed and proclaimed in the life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

"[Intervention] may be the hardest element of Lenten rehab. Everything in us personally, much within our culture, and even some of the theology we pick up in our churches, teaches us to fulfill ourselves, stay out of harm's way, and escape rather than walk into and among folks who are suffering. But Jesus says head straight into all of that. Because that's where he's going. Because that's where God's kingdom is most manifest."ⁱⁱⁱ Following his rebuke of Peter, Jesus says, if you want to follow me, you must deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me. If you want to follow me, you must give up self-preservation – you must give up your life, for only those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will save it.

Intervention is not just about getting rid of a practice, a pattern of behavior, or a set of thoughts or beliefs, it's about righting the path of our ship in a direction that better aligns itself with the will and way of God, as witnessed in the Suffering Servant, who aligned himself with those the who were outcast from the community. "If we believe God is active and that Jesus is alive in the world, then the question posed to us is not whether we confess Jesus as the

Messiah. That's the easy part. We know what the title is."^{iv} Jesus didn't rebuke Peter because he failed to get the title right – even the demons Jesus cast out knew the identity of Jesus. "The question becomes, how do we misunderstand what the title means? How do our expectations not align with God's?"^v

Rehab is a difficult process – the journey of rehab is a hard place. The rehabilitation process, the path to new life as laid out by Christ, requires us to deny ourselves, and to confess where we have been wrong and where we have wronged others. The intervention of Christ into our brokenness invites us to humble ourselves before God's will, acknowledging that even our own faith leaders and institutions are complicit in Christ's death. If we try to preserve ourselves, ignoring that we have a problem, failing to admit our own brokenness and wilderness, we risk death – spiritual, emotional, and physical death.

But in Christ's rebuke, we are able to hear Christ's invitation to true discipleship. Through intervention, we are invited into a rehabilitation program that realigns our lives with God's will. In Christ's question to the disciples, we find ourselves invited to respond, "Who do *you* say that I am?" How we answer this question will define how we live as disciples. But the answer isn't just about Christ's identity, it's about his purpose.

We are a broken and hurting people, who have rebelled against God's love, who have failed to hear the cry of the needy, who have broken God's law, and who have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. Yet, praise God, for Jesus goes before us, to intervene on our behalf, that we may have new life – that we may be freed for joyful obedience. Christ's intervention not only calls us to new life, it is the intervention of God through Jesus Christ that makes new life possible. Praise be to God that we are not alone in our brokenness, but that Christ goes with us, to teach us, to show us, and to intervene for us that we may receive such new life in God's love. Amen.

ⁱ Rehab. Umcdiscipleship.org. Retrieved March 14, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Lamar Williamson Jr. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Mark*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rehab.

^{iv} Micah D. Kiel. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved March 14, 2019.

^v Ibid.