I love blues musician Robert Cray's take on life. It's gritty, it's real, and it's full of raw emotion. Most of his songs sound like they could have come from Cray's personal experience and they resonate with his listeners because they have felt what he is singing about. One of my favorite of Cray's songs is “The Forecast Calls for Pain.” I love it both for its title and its realistic depiction of one person's suffering. This is the refrain:

“Coffee for my breakfast   
shot of whiskey on the side  
It's a dark and dreary   
morning

with the clouds   
covering up the sky  
and the forecast calls  
for pain,

the forecast   
calls for pain  
My baby's turning cold  
and the forecast   
calls for pain”

The forecast calls for pain. We have all been there at one time or another, haven't we? The forecast calls for pain. It's exactly what the disciples did not want to hear from Jesus at this point in their journey together. Up to this moment in Mark's gospel, the disciples had watched Jesus do some amazing things. He healed many, many people: a man with an unclean spirit, a leper, a paralyzed man, a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. They saw him bring a dead girl back to life. The disciples went on a preaching tour of Galilee with Jesus. They heard him tell many parables about what God's kingdom was really like. They watched Jesus feed thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread and a few fish. The disciples saw all the attention Jesus was getting, how crowds rushed to meet him each time he came to a new town. The men started to like being part of Jesus' entourage, of being associated with this mesmerizing man. It had been hard, leaving their families and their jobs, but life on the road with Jesus was starting to get interesting and the disciples didn't want to change anything about it.

Jesus had other plans. He decided it was time to reveal to his disciples why he was there in the first place and what it meant for them to follow him. “Who do people say that I am?” It was the first time Jesus had asked his disciples this question and they responded with what they had heard on the streets. “John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets.” Jesus already knew what people had been saying. It was a sort of throw-away question, one that allowed him to ask the disciples the most important question they ever had or would be asked: “But who do *you* say that I am?” Peter answered quickly, “You are the Messiah.” It was the right answer, of course, but we get the sense that Peter had a different definition of Messiah than the Messiah himself had. Peter and the disciples liked what they had seen so far: the healing, the feeding, the teaching. They wanted more of that, maybe even wanted something of Jesus' messiah-ness to rub off on them. As Jesus' reputation grew, so would theirs. As his fame spread, theirs would, too. Being a disciples was turning out all right as far as his disciples were concerned.

They had no idea what was about to hit them. “The forecast calls for pain,” Jesus told them. Not only would all the traveling and adulation soon be over, Jesus was going to undergo great suffering. Those in power would reject him and sentence him to death. Jesus would be killed. Though he would rise again three days later, the disciples' ride would be over. Not only that, if they still wanted to be known as Jesus' followers, the disciples had to sign on for the suffering, death and sacrifice their friend was getting ready to endure. The forecast called for pain. In a few brief moments on the road with Jesus, the disciples lives changed forever. They scrambled to keep up with Jesus as his prophesies became true but in the end they scattered and betrayed him, their allegiance to Jesus shattered like a mirror they no longer wanted to look into.

The forecast calls for pain. That is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. There are others who would tell you something different. There are Christians who want you to believe that if you follow Christ, God will make you rich. That if you follow Christ, God will anoint you with power to resist suffering, that it will bounce right off you as if you were holding a magic shield. That if you follow Christ, you will be blessed with power and respect and status in your community. That if you pray hard enough, everything you want will come to you. Riches, wellness, respect, a life of ease – not many of us would turn those things down. But most often, they are the result of luck or hard work or good genes. When Jesus calls us to be his disciples, he burns away all that the world calls us to seek and reduces it to ash. Then he focuses us on his way, a way of denial and sacrifice and loss for the sake of the cross.

Before you get too depressed and head for the door, let me tell you this. A life lived for Jesus is the most fulfilling life one could ever hope for. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “To go one's way under the sign of the cross is not misery and desperation, but peace and refreshment for the soul, it is the highest joy. Then we do not walk under our self-made laws and burdens, but under the yoke of him who knows us and who walks under the yoke with us. Under his yoke we are certain of his nearness and communion.” When all the empty promises the world makes us vanish into thin air, who is there by our side? Who is there when we stumble and fall? Who is there when our hearts break and we feel utterly alone? Who is there to bear our burdens, to cry our tears, to hold us in his arms of mercy? The one who has suffered for us is there. The one who has gone to the cross for us is there, showering us with forgiveness, with compassion, with a love that will never end.

The forecast calls for pain. Jesus never promises us a life without pain, for that is not possible in such a broken world. But Jesus promises to go every step of the way with us, to love and honor us always with his very life. And then he sends us out. He sends us not so much to speak the gospel with our mouths as to show it with our hands. Oswald Chambers wrote, “The ecclesiastical idea of a servant of God is not Jesus Christ's idea. His idea is that we serve him by being the servants of other people. The real test of the saint is not preaching the gospel, but washing disciples' feet, that is, doing the things that do not count in the actual estimate of others but count everything in the estimate of God. Jesus Christ's idea of a New Testament saint is not the one who proclaims the gospel merely, but one who becomes broken bread and poured out wine in the hands of Jesus Christ for other lives.”

“Who do you say that I am?” If we are to call him Messiah, then we are to enter into the suffering and pain of others just as Jesus enters into ours. We are to use our hands and muscles to break down walls, to build up the downtrodden, to make a way for those the world holds back. When we do speak, we are to speak a word of truth in a world of double-talk. We are to call out racism for what it is. We are to demand that our politicians stop their name-calling and nonsensical empty talk and give us their true agendas. We are to speak up for children who don't have enough to eat and the elderly who are forgotten. We are to speak out for justice and fair treatment for all, to be the voice of righteousness in a far-from righteous world.

If we are to call him Messiah, then the forecast calls for pain. Not pain for its own sake, to martyr ourselves before God, but pain for the sake of the other. For that is what Jesus did. He sought out the sick, the scorned, the outcasts of the world and he took on their pain, just as he endured the greatest pain possible for the sake of the world. “Who do you say that I am?” The question strips away all that is false in our lives and leads us into the one truth that matters. It leads us into a way of life many would call foolish, but our Messiah calls joy.

Amen.

*Pentecost 16B*

*September 13, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Mark 8:27-38*