

Pentecost 15B  
Mark 8: 27-38  
13 September 2009  
Christ Church

**David and I are just back from the International Film Festival that was held this weekend in Rome, Georgia. Among the many films shown there, one stood out as a powerful illustration of today's Gospel lesson from Mark.**

**The opening scene in the film "Gospel Hill" is set in the late 1960s. News reporters are interviewing a middle-aged black preacher just as he is about to enter his church. They ask him if he is afraid to continue speaking out for civil rights given that Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. have been recently murdered for doing the same.**

**The preacher pauses to reflect and then replies, "I am not afraid of any person who might kill me here on this earth, in this town. The only one I am afraid of is God – of facing my Creator if I have not done what God wants me to do here and now. One thing is certain: Some day, I won't be here. Neither**

**will any of you. Neither will you, sheriff,” he says to the man who has hand-cuffed him and is taking him to jail.**

**This unexpected comment gets the sheriff’s attention. The sheriff, the reporters, and the crowd which as gathered listen intently as the preacher continues: “When I am gone, when you are gone, God’s work will still be here, and it will still need to be done. I’m going to keep that work moving forward.”**

**Not long after that interview, the preacher is shot and killed in the small town of South Carolina where he served.**

**The story then shifts to the present day. We see the son of the murdered preacher, now in middle age, married and living in the community called Gospel Hill, where his family and many other black families have lived since Emancipation. He is an auto mechanic and lives a quiet existence, shunning the public eye. You get the feeling he has been holding himself back all his life.**

**His wife, who teaches at the local elementary school, is as vocal about public issues as her husband is silent. She is actively opposing the under-handed efforts of a group of land developers who have spotted Gospel Hill as cheap real estate to buy up for a proposed golf course. She generates a petition from the residents to prevent the building of the golf course. Meanwhile, her husband continues to work on cars and keep his mouth shut. When she tries to coax him to join her in speaking out, he refuses.**

**Since his father's death he has become cynical. He has lost hope. And, he is afraid. His father's murder is the horror of his life: It's still as fresh for him now as it was when he was young.**

**As the story unfolds, the wife begins to receive death threats; but she refuses to back down. When her husband discovers that his wife is in danger, he drops his passivity and confronts her wife's would-be murderer. Emboldened by his own action, he then takes the risk to speak out, publicly**

**supporting his wife's efforts. As he says to the townspeople, both black and white: "I choose to live in fear no longer. Because to live in fear is not living."**

**The stories of these ordinary people in a rural town in South Carolina are extraordinary. They risk their lives for the sake of right and truth. They move out of lives lived for self and give their lives over to the good of their community and the good of their souls.**

**Jesus tells his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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."**

**God may not require that we literally give up our lives like the preacher in the rural town. But our lives will be required of us in other ways, ways that involve risk – risk of reputation, risk of security, risk of popularity.**

**God wants our lives. Jesus' teaching makes the paradox clear: Only by giving up our lives can we truly live. What would that look like for each of us?**

**Obedience to this teaching of our Lord may be different for every person sitting in church today. Jesus is asking each one of us to let go of whatever it is that we hold most dear. He is asking us to risk the thing of which we are most afraid.**

**Like so many of Jesus' teachings, this seems to go against logic, against human nature, against common sense. But Jesus' words, however challenging, never lead us astray: They bring us to our senses. They line us up with God's will for our lives – with his loving care for us, which is based on his intimate knowledge of each one of us. And he knows us much better, and in deeper ways, than we know ourselves.**

**All of us are called to give our lives away. I don't know about you, but this is terrifying to me. It's really scary to give up the control we think we have over our lives. But Jesus knows that this is our only way to freedom.**

**But, what if we were to persist in hanging on to our so-called security? What would happen if we deny what God would have us do?**

**God does not want our suffering. God wants our hearts. God wants us to remain open to the work that He is giving us to do – the work that has the capacity to transform a troubled world ... and in the process, to transform ourselves.**

**Let us pray for the grace that would enable us to risk all for the sake of true life – a life lived in the love and joy of our blessed Lord.**