

“Nothing Like A Good Rebuke”  
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Focus text: Mark 8: 31-38

The rebuke. It’s an interaction or occurrence that is often an unwelcome guest in our speaking and living.

We tend to avoid it, the rebuke. When Gary Williams, the fiery basketball coach at Maryland, explodes in anger when a call doesn’t go his way, the announcers don’t pay special note of his “rebuke.” We don’t adorn our cars with bumper stickers that call on America to “Rebuke” terrorism. When a student publicly demeans his peer with a well-worded taunt, the crowd doesn’t say “Aw, snap! You just got rebuked!”

Further, the word just sounds objectionable. With its clunking consonants, it sounds like a bunch of loose change banging against the spinning rim of the clothes drier.

And what does it mean, to rebuke? What is “bucking”, and why would someone want to do it again? Who says, in a moment of desperation, what I could use now, is a really good rebuke?

Hardly...

But I rise today in defense of the rebuke.

Let me first define it. I rather hate it when people begin a speech or paper by saying something along the lines of, “Websters Dictionary defines ‘rebuke’ as a such and such and so forth.” To avoid that, I will instead say, “The new Oxford dictionary defines rebuke as...”

Just kidding. I’ll dispense with definitions and give a first hand example of a memorable rebuke.

When Sally and I went for our first ultrasound, of course, I was very excited. But sitting quietly in that waiting room, the only male surrounded by females awaiting examinations for a mysterious array of “women’s issues,” I became a bit fidgety. That, and the fact that my life was about to be changed forever, filled me with nervous energy. I needed something other than maternity magazines for distraction and relief.

So I turned into a jokester, a ham, the waiting room class-clown. I littered the waiting room with funny bits of commentary, making jokes with Sally, with the ladies behind the counter, the young women with the clipboards. Anyone with ears suffered the slings and arrows of my little laughers.

And it didn’t stop in the waiting room. When the ultrasound technician called our names and led us into the exam room, I unleashed another torrent of self-medicating witticisms. I can’t remember a single one of them now. They probably had something to do with Mars and Venus, the folly of pregnancy, who knows what else. But I wouldn’t stop talking.

I’ll never forget what happened next.

Tired of my distractions, the technician looked up from the ultrasound machine, locked her eyes with mine and said, with piercing intensity, “You can stop making jokes now, Dad, unless you don’t want us to proceed with this ultrasound.”

*silence...*

I had never in my life been more effectively silenced. Assaulted by a roundhouse punch of feminine ferocity, I bowed my head, shut my mouth, and let the professional do what she was there to do.

There's nothing like a good rebuke.

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The gospel of Mark is filled with rebukes. Nine of them, to be precise. But none are as thunderous as the rebuke that Jesus unleashes on the apostle Peter.

To this point, Mark has narrated Jesus' travels through Galilee,  
his healings and his miracles,  
his teaching via parables  
his conflicts with the venerable.

In our text, Jesus and his disciples stand at a decisive hinge in the gospel. Their journey is about to take a momentous turn, sparked by a question.

"Who do people say that I am?" Jesus has asked the disciples. "John the Baptist," some conjecture, "Elijah" others still, "one of the prophets" comes the cry. "But who do *you* say that I am" he probes.

Peter answers, "You are the Messiah" (a very loaded term, it seems, which can mean, the Anointed One, the Christ, the one who is going to lead Israel out of this mess of national occupation and spiritual embarrassment.)

For the first time, Jesus then speaks openly and frankly of what awaits him, if he is indeed to be this long-awaited Messiah. He describes unavoidably great suffering, rejection by the elders and priests and scribes, his death, and new life.

Peter grows uncomfortable with this new twist in the narrative. Suffering? Rejection? Death?

He pulls Jesus aside, away from the crowd, and would you believe it, begins to rebuke him. A pitiful, feeble rebuke it was, but it sparks an explosion of holy intensity.

Turning his eyes away from Peter, Jesus locks his gaze into the rest of the disciples, and thunders for all to hear, "Get behind me, Satan!"

"Get behind me, Satan!"

Here is a rebuke that changes everything, (*and provides us a good reason why the choir always sits behind the preacher.*)

Jesus' rebuke of Peter has some precedent in the gospel.

The last time I preached, I experimented a bit and had you all flipping through the Bibles. You seemed to like it. So let's do it again. Only two passages this time, both in Mark:

First, turn to Mark 4: 35 (page 39). "On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'let us go across to the other side.'" And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still! Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

Note how the Lord's rebuke *silenced* the storm, like a nurse technician silencing the loose change clanging inside a nervous husband's psyche.

Now turn to Mark 1:23 (page 35). "Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' and the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him."

Note how the rebuke removed the spirit from its improper place, like a stand-up comedian of a father yanked off center stage so that he could silently behold his wildly unexpected gift.

When Jesus rebukes, that which stands in the way of God's will is silenced and pushed out of the way, so that the new life that God intends can be revealed.

So it was with Peter.

- Peter noisily resisted what Jesus needed to do, and be, as the Messiah.
  - Jesus silences him and subdues his resistance.
- Peter pulled Jesus aside, so he could advise him on the best path for success.
  - Jesus cast Peter behind him, so he could follow him to glory
- Peter, determined to divert Jesus away from the cross, said, "Jesus, hold on."
  - Jesus, determined to lead him in the *way* of the cross, said "Peter, let go."

It's the summation of Jesus' rebuke. Peter, let go.

Jesus goes on... "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... will save it."

When Jesus speaks of life, he means more than heartbeats. Some have translated life as "souls". That doesn't quite capture it either.

Nonetheless, these are inspired, but difficult words. We like the way they sound, but not what they mean. All this talk of carrying of giving up that which one treasures most, of carrying crosses, of passing through suffering instead of being rescued from it, this is not what gets us out of bed on Sunday mornings to come to church.

Ronald Goetz has written, "The whole history of the Christian church can be seen as merely a continuation of the heated exchange between Peter and Jesus." (Goetz, Ronald, "'Get Thee Behind Me, Satan,'" *The Christian Century*, 1986.)

Indeed, like Peter before us, we as a church and as a people employ a vast array of distractions to relieve ourselves of our anxieties. We put our agendas on center stage and with passive and active aggression do what we can to divert Jesus from the path he would have us follow. This is our ongoing rebuke. The good news is that Jesus is not swayed.

Jesus rebukes back.

It may be odd to celebrate the rebuke. We do not teach our children to sing, 'Jesus rebukes me, this I know, for the bible tells me so.' Hear also the words of the prophet Isaiah: **(Isaiah 54:9)** This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and *will not rebuke* you.

But isn't it good news to know that his rebuke, grounded in love, addresses the very part of ourselves we cannot seem to change on our own? The parts we cannot let go of?

Jesus looks with piercing intensity at those places. And indeed rebukes – with love -- all that causes us to make jokes in the waiting room of life, or get in the way of what God wants to have happen. While not always pleasant, this rebuke may be the best thing that could happen to us. It calms our stormy seas; it casts out our long-dwelling demons.

And it beckons us into a holy silence. Where we can take our place in line behind the Lord, and encounter the paradox of a life that comes to us in losing it, not saving it. It's a life given to us in the very body and blood of Jesus, the Christ, who gave his life so that we might live.

Men, and women. This is no joke. There's nothing like a good rebuke. Praise be to God. Amen.

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