



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 16, 2018
ISAIAH 50:4-9A; PSALM 116:1-8; JAMES 3:1-12; MARK 8:27-38

ANSWERING THE QUESTION

Mark 8:27-38 [*Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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."

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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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."]

Last month, I spent a couple days in New York City, with one full day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As I made my way through the galleries of eastern and western art, some pieces thousands of years old and others made in the last century, I was struck by the myriad ways

that Jesus Christ was portrayed. In one Byzantine icon, he is the paradigm of strength and inscrutability, with a firmly set jaw and eyes gazing resolutely into the distance. In an illuminated manuscript from the early middle ages, his body is taken down from the cross by women

disciples. You know it is Jesus because of the scene, but there are no distinguishing physical features – he is everyman, a slender, vulnerable, suffering servant. And in a 19th century painting, he is shown fast asleep on a boat with the disciples during a roaring tempest. His likeness is highly detailed – he is a muscular, calm, central presence while the panicked men around him all blend into one another. In each of these works, you could see the artist grappling with the question Jesus poses in today’s gospel, “Who do you say I am?” It is a question for the ages.

During his life, to his disciples, Jesus is a teacher, their rabbi. But as their travels unfold, they witness multiple healings and Jesus’ followers grow. And they start to wonder. They realize that while Jesus stands in the prophetic tradition of John the Baptist or Elijah, there is something much bigger and more singular about him. Peter must have been mulling this question over for weeks, reflecting on what he is seeing and who this man Jesus really is. Because when Jesus asks him point blank, “What do you say about me, Peter?” there is no hesitation. “You are the Messiah,” Peter clearly answers. In Matthew’s telling of this story, Jesus replies, “Blessed are you! Only God could

have revealed this to you.” But in today’s reading, Jesus acknowledges this truth by ordering the disciples to keep it secret.

Because to call Jesus “Messiah” is a big deal. “Messiah” is the translation of the Greek word “Christos,” which means “the anointed one.” The one for whom Israel has waited for generations, the divinely appointed king who will liberate them from their Gentile oppressors and inaugurate the reign of God’s justice upon the earth. This Messiah is expected to come in a blaze of glory and a great show of power. So, it is deeply unsettling to Peter when Jesus undermines this triumphal image.

Jesus calls himself the “Son of Man” instead and predicts that he will – he must – undergo great suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders and killed, only to “rise again” three days later. That is not anyone’s idea of the victor for whom they’ve waited. So, Peter takes him aside to object, but Jesus shuts down discussion. “You are wrong, Peter. You are applying your world view to God. Stop trying to fit me in to your conquering hero narrative and start asking what God is up to in all of this.” Twice more in Mark’s gospel, Jesus tells his followers that the Son of Man must experience suffering, rejection and

death, and that he will rise from the dead. But they never really grasp what he is telling them.

It is only after his death and resurrection, as Jesus' disciples struggle with all that has happened, that together they begin to trust that this Son of Man, who came not to be served, but to serve, is also the messiah they hoped for. As they travel themselves and teach and heal in Jesus' name, the disciples experience suffering in their own lives. They also grow in faith and clarity. Eventually, the disciples come to proclaim that in bearing the pain and injustice heaped upon him, Jesus shows that God is present to all human suffering and darkness. His resurrection and new life are the source and the symbol of their bedrock of faith. It is our bedrock, too – no human loss or need is beyond the transformative power of God.

But the disciples don't know any of this yet in today's gospel. So, Jesus gathers the entire crowd of followers and tells them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for the gospel will save it."

Deny yourself and take up your cross. These are two pretty sobering commands

and – taken out of context – they can be dangerous. This seeming requirement of self-sacrifice has been misused to glorify suffering for its own sake. There have been times when Christians have supposed that it is God's will for people to suffer; therefore, they should not work against their own oppression or that of others. Abusers of power have held up this interpretation to justify their actions and keep others in their place.

But the context here is the life and gospel of Jesus Christ. He sought to liberate people from bondage, not insist that their burdens be borne without complaint. He taught that the love and healing grace of God belong to everyone. And he taught that the way we give thanks for that love is to serve others.

So then, what does it mean for us to deny ourselves, who are certainly part of the "haves" of this world? I wonder if it has something to do with resisting our natural self-preoccupation so that we try to set aside our own concerns to see the world through God's eyes and set our priorities from there. And I wonder about this cross Jesus commands us to take up. I know that many in this community already bear heavy loads that they did not choose –

grave illness, grief, psychic wounds, and more.

And I am moved by the fierce compassion you abundantly offer to others in need. I have seen how God transforms our individual suffering when we broaden our definition of family to include all who are at risk. But it is still hard. There is much suffering in our world, and we want to help bear it. We want to follow Jesus. But we don't need to review this week's headlines to know that it can seem intractable and overwhelming.

I wonder if that's why, in today's gospel, when the small group of disciples don't

get what Jesus is trying to teach them, he calls the whole crowd together. He addresses them as a group. "All of you, if you want to follow me, take up your cross together." Doesn't that shift things?

We can carry so much more because we do not follow Jesus alone. So, we offer our full selves – our time, resources, and energy – *together, as a community*, in service of others, striving to see the world through God's eyes and trusting that God is with us.

That is how we say who Jesus is. Amen.



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