

Sunday, September 16, 2018
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19 (Year B)

Mark 8.27-38

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We've got a lot going on in today's Gospel reading. Before we jump in, it's important to note that of Mark's 16 chapters, this passage today falls at the end of the 8th chapter, putting it at the exact midpoint, the center, of Mark's Gospel. This is not accidental. In writings of the day, the author often placed the most important information—the central theme of the document—at the midpoint of the document to indicate its significance. Critical analysis of Mark confirms that today's reading is indeed the central theme or argument of Mark's Gospel.

This central theme is comprised of three parts, with each part leading us to a new revelation. The first is Peter's confession of who Jesus is. Second is Jesus' first prediction of his Passion. And third is a statement of what it means to follow Jesus in light of this new information.

The first part is pretty self-explanatory. Jesus asks the disciples who people are saying that he is. After a number of responses, he then asks who they—the disciples—say he is. And Peter wins the prize. "You are the Messiah" (Mk 8.29).

But then in the second part, Jesus completely bursts Peter's bubble when he delivers his first Passion prediction to the disciples. "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" (Mk 8.31). In so doing, Jesus is describing his vision of who the Messiah is based on the image of the suffering servant in Isaiah. One that proclaims the Messiah must suffer and be killed. Peter objects to this idea and therefore rebukes Jesus. This is not the vision and understanding of the Messiah according to popular Jewish understanding—the understanding Peter himself has bought into. Suffering is not part of that understanding of who the Messiah is. And certainly death is not part of the deal.

In response Jesus rebukes Peter, famously saying "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mk 8.33). About seven months ago, on the second Sunday in Lent, we had the majority of this passage as our Gospel reading and I preached on what it meant for Jesus to say "get behind me Satan" to Peter. Of course, you all remember that sermon—every word committed to memory. But for those who didn't hear that sermon, the bottom line is that Jesus was not calling Peter evil. Rather, he is using an ancient understanding of the term *satan*—one who takes the role of adversary, of obstructing or opposing. Peter was not able to accept the truth Jesus presents so seeks to prevent Jesus' self-proclaimed fate. Peter identifies Jesus as Messiah but has no idea what it truly means. And when the truth is revealed, Peter is unable to accept this new reality. Rather than try to justify or explain, Jesus merely tells Peter that rather than seek to prevent his suffering and death, he needs to get behind Jesus, to support him, in what is to come. That Peter needs to get behind him and follow on the journey Jesus is about to make.

This is all really just setting the stage for the real point Jesus is wanting to make. We have had the revelation of who Jesus is—the Messiah. We have had the revelation of just what that means and the uneasy implication that his is not an easy path to follow. So now we turn to what it means for us to follow Jesus as our Messiah. After Jesus tells Peter that he needs to get behind him and follow him, he turns to the other disciples and the assembled crowd and tells them that they, too, are included in this. “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” (Mk 8.34-35).

The common understanding of these verses is that we must suffer as Jesus does. Well that’s a real motivation for following Jesus! But I don’t think that is what Jesus was really saying. In Mark, emphasis on suffering is really a hope for future liberation (*New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, special note p. 1825). Jesus is letting his hearers know that following him leads not to death as he will ultimately have to face, but to life. He is calling his followers to radical faith even as he prepares them for the eventuality of his own Passion. That his Passion is necessary for them to achieve the new life that is the promise of the Messiah. That they are to trust that he will provide the liberation that has long been anticipated with the coming of the Messiah. That he will provide that liberation, just not in the way that they have been taught to expect. Rather, liberation will come through the cross.

Jesus is clear that we have a response to make. We have to take steps to follow him. The key to how we do this is Jesus’ statement, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Two points: deny yourself and take up your cross. Only then can we truly follow him.

So what does it mean to deny yourself?

In the simplest sense, denying yourself means that your own self-interests and personal desires are no longer central, no longer driving forces, in your life. But I think Jesus was getting at something deeper, more fundamental, to who we are as those created in the image and likeness of God. Denying ourselves is really about denying our image of our self. How we view ourselves. For some, that is denying an inflated image of self-importance, of infatuation with one’s own sense of self-worth. For others, that is denying a sense of powerlessness, of feeling of little or no value, denying poor self-esteem. And for some of us, that may even be denying an odd, incongruous mix of the two.

Instead, we are to focus on what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God. To focus on what it means to be beloved of God. To focus on what it means to be part of the Body of Christ. Jesus is telling us that we are part of something bigger. Something beyond ourselves. That whoever want to save their life—and who of us doesn’t want that—will lose it. That whoever hangs on to the false images of themselves ultimately loses sight of who they truly are—beloved of God.

But whoever embraces the vision that Christ has of us and lives into that image, whoever embraces and lives into the Gospel, saves their life. Saves the true essence of who they are

created and called to be. As theologian Frederick Buechner writes in his book, *Listening to Your Life*: “the life you clutch, hoard, guard, and play safe with is in the end a life worth little to anybody, including yourself; and only a life given away for love’s sake is a life worth living” (quoted in Synthesis, Proper 19, September 16, 2018).

To do that, we must take up our cross. So what does it mean to take up your cross?

Jesus would not, and could not, have literally meant that those who follow him are to take up the cross—to go to crucifixion—for their faith. Jesus never even revealed that he would die on a cross. Not only that, crucifixion was a punishment reserved for lowly criminals. Jesus would never have thought of himself, and certainly not his followers, as criminals. So he certainly would not have expected anything as horrific as that to befall his followers. If anything, he was seeking to use imagery associated with taking up the cross to convey a message.

When the Roman Empire executed criminals by means of crucifixion, taking up the cross meant that the condemned criminal carried the horizontal beam of the cross to the place of crucifixion (the vertical beam would have already been in place). Along the way, the criminal, signified as such by the beam he carried, was subjected to ridicule, insults, and being spit upon by those he passed along the way.

If anything, Jesus’ statement is more about the general shame associated with the cross and with crucifixion. In metaphorically taking up the cross, of identifying with Jesus, his followers are not to shun the cross but accept it. They should not be ashamed of the cross, but accept it as the means of salvation. They are not to be ashamed of Jesus’ fate on the cross, but to be so unashamed as to be willing to risk sharing it. Even though they likely will never be called to do so.

Without a doubt, in the early days of the Church taking up the cross would have had a less metaphorical and a more literal meaning of facing the prospect of persecution for one’s faith. But not now. Not since the 4th century when the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. Post-Constantine, that means the taking up of one’s cross needs to be redefined.

Some take the reference to taking up the cross to mean that it is God’s will for them to suffer and therefore they should not resist any suffering that befalls them. That they are to seek martyrdom or to acquiesce to conditions of misery to show their faithfulness. Poppycock! Absolute hogwash! Again, Jesus could not have meant taking up our cross to mean that we have to suffer or even die to show our devotion to him. He only wants us to have life. He took up his cross so that we wouldn’t have to literally take up our own cross. He took up his cross for us so that we would have the opportunity for new life. And to have it abundantly.

It is more likely that what he meant by taking up the cross has more to do with embracing its significance rather than enduring it. To embrace the promise of liberation and new life that Jesus secured through his own cross—through his death on that cross. In embracing the new life that the cross secures and promises, it also means embracing the message of the cross and of the One who died upon it—to embrace the message of the Gospel. We recognize that the

mission and ministry of the Messiah is to a suffering world. That Christ came into a world filled with pain with the express purpose of relieving that pain. Jesus challenges his followers to take up their cross and embrace pain in the world and to work with him to relieve it. Another way to look at it is that as we grow spiritually under the weight of the cross, we move from apathy to empathy. The pain of the world becomes our pain and we share in it and work to ease it, just as Christ does.

Only by denying our own unhealthy misconceptions of who we are and embracing the image God has of us, and only by embracing the hope and promise of the Gospel as exemplified by Christ going to the cross for our sake—the hope and promise of love, mercy, and forgiveness—can we truly follow Jesus. When we seek to do this, we must do so wholeheartedly. We must be “all in,” being 100% committed to using our gifts, skills, talents, and resources to share and to live the Gospel.

Or, in the words of JC Austin, Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, “‘For those who want to save their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will lose it.’ In other words, Jesus is for losers; the question is what we are willing to lose” (*Synthesis Today* email, September 11, 2018).

What are we willing to lose, and what are we willing to take up, for the sake of Christ and for the sake of his Gospel?