

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?”²⁸ And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”²⁹ He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then 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.³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.³³ 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.”

³⁴He 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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.”

Cross Roads

February 25, 2018

I recently had a very intense conversation with someone who is dear to me and whom I have known for a long, long, time. It might even have been considered to be a fight, depending on your perspective. But in the midst of the conversation it became clear that, on several levels, we just didn't know each other very well. We didn't understand one another. That there is still some mystery in our relationship, still some things to learn. And though I have doubts about my ability to learn those things and deepen my understanding, my love for that person is unyielding. Maybe you've had a few conversations like that as well? And I couldn't help but think about our encounter today with Jesus and the disciples when they try to understand who he is and quite honestly, miss the mark. And did they leave that moment with more certainty or more doubts?

“Who do you say that I am?” That's sort of a daunting question that Jesus asks, isn't it? This whole scene reminds me of those uncomfortable moments in the classroom when the professor asks a question you don't have the answer to and you are desperately hoping he won't call on you. You do your best not to look directly at the professor all the while chanting in your head, “please don't call on me...please don't call on me.” Of course, you're exactly the one she's going to call on! Now some people have no difficulty answering Jesus' question and I can appreciate that. But apparently, not everyone can, including the disciples. They struggle with that one a little bit.

And Lent is a time that we too, like the disciples, try to answer that question, a question that even Jesus had to answer for himself fully, which is why he went into the wilderness after his baptism, which some of us preached on last week. A time where we considered Jesus' forty days in the wilderness—forty days which in Mark's gospel is about 3 lines long—but forty days for Jesus to think about what it means to be the Beloved Son of God, to be the Messiah, to be Jesus. All of this occurs before he even speaks a word or heals a single person. Being in the wilderness is a time and place to come face to face with doubts and fears; a place to be tested, to be defined. To get some things straight in his mind before he begins his ministry. Something we too are supposed to be doing during this time of Lent. And like the disciples, I struggle a little bit.

I also find myself like the disciples, not entirely sure who Jesus is sometimes. Only Peter responds with “You are the Messiah” nobody else. And even he doesn't truly understand it as Jesus has to remind him in the next verses. Where he says to Peter, “Get behind me Satan for you are confusing earthly things with heavenly

things!” and then told them not to tell anyone about him. Now, it has always puzzled me why he says this. Did Jesus have his own doubts about what that meant or was it something else? One reason may be that Jesus silences the disciples because he doesn't want to be defined by the expectations of others.

Just saying the word, “Messiah” in public causes folks to make assumptions and it certainly did for those hearing it that day who were steeped in Jewish history and covenant. They might be expecting him to be a warrior king. Someone like King David or Solomon. Perhaps he would come in and wipe the slate clean and get rid of all those Romans! Would he restore Israel to her position of religious and political power? Or would he be like Elijah a great prophet and leader of kings? Would he be like John and live in the wilderness calling others to repent? Would he be who they wanted him to be...or something else? And maybe when Jesus lets them know that he will not be that kind of Messiah, that may be why Peter pulled him over to the side and said, “No, no, no, that can't happen to you! You can't just die! What are you thinking?”

Now it gets me wondering how I would answer Jesus' question too. What am I looking for when I think about the Messiah? How often do we get that wrong, I wonder? Because it seems to me that I hear a lot of people looking for the kind of Messiah that these folks were looking for too. They want a warrior Messiah who will come into their world and put things right with the wave of a hand. They want a Messiah who makes everyone 'toe the line' and shape up. They want a Messiah who is strong and powerful and who has no weaknesses. But Jesus has other ideas, doesn't he? He won't live up to those expectations and he won't let you put him in a box. The Messiah he will be is one who is going to suffer. He is going to suffer because he speaks truth to power, he eats and drinks with the lowest and the highest, he challenges the status quo, and he loves unconditionally. He surrenders himself completely to God. He is going to be rejected. He is going to be killed. He is going to rise again, and again, and again. And he makes it pretty clear that that's what he expects of those who will follow him. He puts the “No Pain, No Gain” motto to the test doesn't he?

He challenges them and us to consider what it means to take up your cross. Deny yourself, your ego, all the things in your life that separate you from God and follow him. stop worrying about saving your life and choose rather, to lose your life for the sake of others, just as he did and is doing every single day. Rev. Kate Moorhead in her sermon said this, “Jesus instead offers us another model for devotion. Don't worship yourself, he says, don't spend all your time trying to fix yourself or please yourself or just stay alive but instead, give your life away. Hand it over to God. Lose yourself and you will find yourself. Take up your cross and in following Christ you will find out who you truly are.” To say as the apostle Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Galatians 2: 19-20) What does that life look like, I wonder? What are the many ways that we pick up our crosses both large and small, and follow Him?

Lutheran Pastor Janet Hunt shared this beautiful story that really spoke to me about that and I hope it does for you as well. She tells it like this. “On Ash Wednesday this year, I got a call from our local hospital. Diane, one of the staff who checks people in for surgery and who often greets me from the front desk, asked if I would be over that way today. I hadn't planned to be as so far as I knew, none of our Lutherans were in the hospital. Even so, I asked what she needed. She told me that somebody in maternity was requesting ashes.

Well, I didn't think much about it until it was time for me to head out the door. It was then I turned back to one of our staff at church and said, “Maternity! I wonder what's going on!” For it seemed at first like such an unlikely place for one to be making this request.

So off I went. After I was buzzed in to the maternity wing, they sent me down the hall. I knocked on the door and the voice of a young woman called out to come in. When I did, I walked in to meet the woman behind the

voice — having regular contractions by now. The father of the baby was holding her hand. Her grandmother and aunt stood at the end of her bed, looking on with a visible mix of hope and anxiety.

After introducing myself, I took off my coat, but before I went any further I paused to ask, “Why ashes? Why here and now?” For it would seem she would have more important things to tend to in those hours.

Her response? “It’s Ash Wednesday!” And cradling her stomach she continued, “I just wanted to start things off right for this baby!” And so over and over to all those present I made the sign of the cross in ash and repeated the words, ‘Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.’ And then we prayed for a safe birth for mother and child before I headed down the hall to carry ashes and prayers to others who were requesting the same since the initial call summoned me.

Now I don’t know if that young woman was speaking out of rote obligation or not. I do suspect, however, that not many would pause to think of this while they were in active labor. And yet, life and death do stand hand in hand in delivery rooms as anyone paying attention might tell you. And yes, it is such times which bring to us the certainty of the gift of life and perhaps, also, the limits of our own power in this life now. It is such times which remind us that we are called to something more than being for just ourselves alone. And yes, it is in times such as those when we are called to consider what our lives are *for*, that we would do well to remember that as followers of Jesus, we are called to pick up our crosses as Jesus did. It is that cross I traced on that young mother’s forehead and on the foreheads of those who love her and who yearn for all good things for her and her baby. Oh yes, isn’t it always a gift to remember that even while we heed the call to pick up our cross, Jesus already died on one in our behalf?

It is several days later now and this much I know for sure. That young mother and dad have already begun to learn what it is to ‘die’ for the sake of another as they love that little girl they have by now brought home.

For this I do believe. The dying Jesus calls us to, can be made up of big actions and small ones, too. For many of us, this ‘dying’ may be experienced much more in the mundane day to day as we heed that call and choose to be and do for others. As much as anything else:

- It may be in the listening rather than speaking first;
- It may be in the meal prepared and shared;
- It may be in the snow shoveled for a neighbor, the lawn raked for a friend, the cookies baked and delivered to someone whose day it will brighten;
- It may be in the hospital call made, the funeral visitation line endured, or the repetitive conversation shared with someone suffering from dementia when you can think of a thousand seemingly more rewarding other obligations calling your name;

And yes, it may be in something as small as my remembering to take the time to spread salt on my back steps and driveway so that my 84-year-old mother won’t slip and fall. For some of us, some of the time, picking up the cross Jesus calls us to now will be huge. It may come once in a memorable and permanent way. And for many of us, much of the time, those crosses which we pick up for the sake of others won’t seem so big. Although even those may well be more meaningful, more significant than we first believe.”

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? Will you leave yourself behind and never be the same? Will you let my love be shown; will you let my name be known; will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.