

Sermon

Proper 19B September 15, 2024

Mark 8:27-38

We have reached that point in Mark where the overall focus takes a dramatic turn. Up to now the focus in Mark's gospel has been to show the power and authority of Jesus which can be found in the various miracle and teaching stories we have heard/seen so far. But beginning today, things change.

Jesus still heals people, and he still teaches people. But between here and the Holy Week story we are given three Passion predictions, the Transfiguration, and a call to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells us what kind of Messiah he is. He first asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They give a variety of answers: the prophet, John the Baptist reincarnated, etc. He then asks, "Yes, but who do YOU say I am?" Peter proclaims, "You are the Messiah."

Peter is right in identifying Jesus as the Messiah; the problem is that Peter has a different idea of what/who the Messiah is or should be than does Jesus.

In response to Peter's proclamation, Jesus give his first Passion prediction. In that prediction Jesus says that he will suffer, be rejected, killed, and rise again on the third day. But Peter, and a lot of us, don't want to hear that first part.

The Messiah Peter, and a lot of Christians today, desires is a powerful, take-no-prisoners, triumphant, warrior king. We want someone to crush our enemies and restore our kingdom. This, though, is one of the same temptations from Satan that Jesus faced in the wilderness: "If you bow down to me, I will give you all the kingdoms of the world." Satan tempted Jesus with ultimate worldly power, giving him the power to crush his and restore his kingdom.

And this is why Jesus calls Peter, "Satan" – not because Peter is Satan incarnate, but because Peter's desire for worldly power, the restoration of the kingdom, and to crush his enemies is in direct opposition to Jesus and his earthly destiny. "Satan" is a Hebrew word for "Adversary." In this scene, Peter is taking an adversarial role against Jesus. This opposition to Jesus, what he stands for, and how he will accomplish his mission, continues today.

There are churches, pastors, and political leaders who are fond of saying that Christians need to take up arms, to fight for Christ and make this country a “Christian nation” by any means necessary. But you know what? Posting the Ten Commandments in government buildings and schools didn’t do a damn thing to stop the school shooting at Apalachee High School in Georgia last week.

Jesus isn’t calling us to take up arms. Jesus is calling us to take up our cross.

We must remember that taking up our cross, or bearing our cross, is a voluntary act of submission. It doesn’t mean that we passively accept random trials or difficulties that are foisted on us through outside forces. Your “cross to bear” is not chronic pain. It’s not a bad mother-in-law. It’s not any number of other things that we have to deal with while dramatically proclaiming near our fainting couch that this, “Is just my cross to bear; oh my.”

Taking up our cross is a willful act in which we choose loyalty to Jesus over the world. Taking up our cross doesn’t mean that we will crush our enemies. It doesn’t mean we will trample down those who oppose us in favor of restoring a kingdom made in our image.

But it does mean we will die.

To take up our cross is to take up serving others with grace, compassion, humility, and sacrificial love. To take up your cross is to choose to give your life for the sake of the gospel. It’s to choose to live beyond what the world says is sensible. It’s to choose to live in abundance not scarcity. To take up your cross is to choose a worldly death that leads to a reinvented, reincarnated, life in Christ.

I believe we got a small glimpse of this when we look back at the Harvest Hoedown. This event has, over the years, been used to help fund our budget. With the fires we’ve experienced in NE Wyoming, the Harvest Hoedown Committee proposed sending 25% of proceeds to local fire relief. The proposal was sent to the Vestry for approval. After much discussion, which included thoughts that this is what we should do as a church and concern the budget couldn’t handle it, the proposal was accepted.

The idea for doing this, as well as its ultimate approval, was an understanding that we needed to live what we preach. We needed to live beyond what the world says is sensible. We needed to live in the abundance of God's love. The decision led us to live, at least in this instance, in a reinvented life in Christ.

I get it. There are days when Peter's vision of a Messiah is what I want. There are days when I would love nothing more than to see Jesus on that war stallion riding over the hills with the army of heaven laying waste to all that stood in his way. But that is not the Messiah that Jesus proclaims. That is not what Jesus came to do.

Jesus came to lay down his life so that in his death we might have abundant life.

Our faith is a paradox: if you want to save your life, then you must lose it for the sake of Christ and the gospel. What are you willing to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel?

Amen.