

Who Do you Say I am?
Judi Geistlinger – First Presbyterian Champaign and Windsor of Savoy
Mark 8:27-38

Twenty years ago yesterday, everything changed.

As this weekend approached, I just was not sure what to do with all my feelings. Of sadness. Of loss. Of how different things have become over time.

Saturday morning, I participated in the Run to Remember here in town. It was a bright, clear morning reminiscent of the crystal blue skies some 20 years ago. On my back I carried a bib with the names of family members who have died in the ensuing years. During the run, I listened to the radio broadcast of memorial services and prayed during the moments of silence. One of the last miles of the race, a young man's family and friends cheered on runners, as their way of paying tribute to their son and friend Drew, who died tragically last year. Each step brought a measure of peace as I felt I was honoring and remembering and holding my loved ones close to my heart and lifted-up in prayer the names of those who shared their loved one's names on their shirts. *This run of remembrance was just what I needed, being with people who were also carrying their own memories, their own loss.*

Remembering. Honoring. Holding close in our hearts. Memories. These are what help us make sense of loss and help us navigate our grief.

Yes, 20 years ago everything changed.

For the disciples, everything changed when they met Jesus.

Today's gospel passage comes from midway through the gospel of Mark. The gospel of Mark, which is short, direct and to the point, helps us understand the mystery of Jesus our Messiah. Jesus and his disciples were on the way, as it were, to the gentile region of Caesarea Philippi. On the way... this phrase is not used lightly as it expresses both movement and was, in biblical times, what the new Christians were known as.

This gospel of Mark starts with the phrase, "the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son." In this first half of Mark, we hear about John the Baptist's words calling for preparation then baptizing Jesus, the calling of the disciples, many miracles,

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healings, feeding of thousands, and as a result, the word about this man Jesus cannot help but get out. This passage is about halfway through the gospel, and we have a midterm exam, if you will, for the disciples.

It's almost as if Jesus were driving the carpool van and asks a question of his teenage charges. So, friends, what is the word on the street? Who do people say I am?

I like the easy question with which Jesus opens his mid-term exam. It's an excellent way to get his disciples to start talking. And the disciples do talk. They have listened to the crowds. They know what people are saying.

Jesus follows up with the heart of the matter..." And what about you? Who do YOU say that I am?

It is a great question.... who do you say I am? It is a question we should ask ourselves...who is Jesus?

Peter, ever the impetuous disciple, supplies the Sunday School answer: "You are the Christ, the Messiah."

Mark's telling of this interchange does not have Jesus gushing positively over Peter's response. No, in an unexpected response to the "right answer" Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone about him. To a modern ear, it sounds quite strange. I mean as followers of Jesus, aren't we supposed to be sharing the word about Jesus and all God has done for us? About what a difference having our Lord means for us personally?

But having the "right answer" may not be correct if you dig a little deeper to see how Peter got there, or what his expectations of Jesus the embodied Messiah are. You see, beliefs by Jews of what a Messiah would be largely stemmed from their situation, of being under Roman rule and of their lack of a real leader, such as when King David and Solomon were on the throne. The expectations were of power, might in the form of political leader, and restoring Israel's righteous place in the world.

So, when Jesus takes his disciples aside and gives them an insight about what was to come, they were not prepared. How could they be? Did they expect the Messiah to suffer? To be rejected by all the religious leaders? To be killed and then rise up after 3 days? In no way!

Presbyterian preacher Betsy Swetenburg said in her sermon for this week:

"Peter thinks he knows Jesus. He thinks he knows what it means to follow Jesus. He thinks he knows what it means for Jesus to be Jesus. So, when Jesus opens his

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mouth and says that he needs to undergo suffering, face rejection, and die, Peter isn't prepared for that information."¹

This teaching too much for Peter. Peter took Jesus aside and told him that a Messiah doesn't suffer!

Peter wanted to override Jesus's narrative because at the end of the day that seemed easier than adjusting his image of Jesus.

Peter thought he'd picked a winner. Peter thought he'd picked a Messiah who didn't have to suffer. Because how can you have an almighty and all-powerful God if God has to suffer? How can God deliver us if God can't deliver God's self? Peter probably thought he was doing Jesus a favor, reminding him of that small but very significant detail that he is both human *and* God. Reminding him that he could choose to avoid the suffering.²

Peter believed the promised Messiah was supposed to be powerful, lead and get them out of the mess of occupied Roman rule. Peter was trying to make Jesus fit into the Messiah box he had prepared for him.

Don't we too, try to fit Jesus into the box we prefer? Don't we try to dismiss uncomfortable teachings? Like, you really didn't mean that it is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than rich man to enter heaven? You didn't mean that for me, did you, Jesus? You did not mean for me to love the neighbor who has those awful signs in their yard, whose politics are so different than what I believe. Or the ones who let their dogs roam, their children run all over and who never ask before they "borrow something" never to return it? Love those people? Treat them as I want to be treated? Forgiving someone not merely 7 times, but 70 times? I'm supposed to turn the other cheek, even when they have said such cruel, untrue things? Suffering? Seriously Jesus? You meant all that for me?

Jesus was having none of Peter's rebuke. Jesus went so far as to call Peter (on whom he had said he would build his church) **Satan** of all things. Jesus uses this exchange to point out just how far off Peter's understanding of him is. Peter may have had the "Sunday School" answer that Jesus was the Messiah, but he really didn't understand at all.

¹ Betsy Swetenburg <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/612d073c6615fbf44000024/the-rev-betsy-swetenburg-thats-what-he-said-get-behind-me-satan>

² Swetenburg again

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Perhaps it is this deep MISunderstanding of who Jesus as the Messiah is, that prompts Jesus to require his disciples NOT tell anyone about who Jesus is. They just did NOT get it. They have so much to learn along their journey with Jesus. Eventually, when Jesus' life and calling have been fulfilled in his death and resurrection, then they will not be able to help from telling the good news.

Jesus uses this conversation to expand just what he meant in the private conversation with the disciples. Jesus meant what he said about what was in store for him: suffering, rejections, death and resurrection. God's world has upside down expectations in comparison to the worldly expectations. Our world may tell us look out for number one, but Jesus has a new teaching, one that will bring fulfillment.

“All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them.”

Saying no to themselves...in our instant gratification world that is a bitter pill to swallow. Perhaps even more bitter for the disciples was the idea of the cross and crucifixion in particular. Under Roman rule crucifixion was an instrument used for its victim's utter degradation and excruciating torture. So, to ask followers to pick up their crosses was to prepare to be humiliated and tortured for the sake of following Jesus.

I love the way the Message puts it:

“³⁴⁻³⁷ Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?”

I'm not sure that, as Eugene Peterson puts it, “You're not in the driver's seat; I am.” Or “Don't run from suffering, embrace it” is any more palatable to us today. I don't know about you, but I like to be in control. Pain is not my friend. I don't enjoy suffering or frankly discomfort at all. Pain and self-sacrifice are things all too often we tend to avoid.

Yet this is just what God calls us to, an upside-down world of priorities, where we lift up the downtrodden and honor the lowly, and don't look out for ourselves as the number

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one priority. Jesus tells us that in being selfish, we lose ourselves, but in being generous, in self-giving, that is where we find our best selves, the lives to which God calls us.

It is counter-intuitive, but self-giving, even to the point of self-sacrifice can be spiritually freeing and life-giving.

I have been drawn to the stories this week of those who did just that. We remember those who gave the last full measure of devotion. We remember those who sacrificed and served. We have remembered those who ran towards burning buildings so they could save lives.

Clifton Black wrote in his commentary for this week:

“We are privileged to know everyday folks who have so internalized this quality of discipleship that, in the critical moment, they know what to do. There’s Arland D. Williams, Jr., the passenger aboard Air Florida Flight 90 on January 13, 1982, which after take-off crashed into Washington’s 14th Street Bridge, then into the icy Potomac River. Fighting a lifelong fear of water, clinging to twisted wreckage, he handed over to the five other survivors one life-vest after another. When all but Williams had been pulled ashore, the helicopter returned to the site to save him. He was gone.

Most of us may never master such integral calculus of charity, but failure needn’t be the enemy of aspiration. We know the way. Other disciples walk it with us. Jesus remains in the lead.”³

We remember those who have gone before and the examples they left behind. Jesus showed us the way and many other faithful people, some we have had the privilege of knowing in our own lives, have also shown the way. As we remember, recall those stories and share. It might be just the inspiration someone needs to hear today.

If we ask ourselves, who is Jesus? May we dare to answer my Lord and Savior, who prompts us to pick up our crosses and follow wherever he leads.

³ Clifton Davis in WorkingPreacher.com commentary on the gospel <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-2/commentary-on-mark-827-38-5> for 9/12/21