

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Sermon 9/13/09
Mark 8:27-38 "Who Do You Say That I Am?"
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Who do you say I am? Get behind me, Satan! If you want to live, you must die. To follow, take up your cross. There are so many paradoxes and swift changes in today's Gospel story that it is hard to know where to begin to unpack it all. So rich with meaning for who Jesus is, and what it means to be a disciple. But as I unpacked some of that in preparation for this sermon, I found myself drawn to this notion of following Jesus. It made me think about what we must deny or put down in order to follow Jesus, and what we must take up. The text says, of course, that we must pick up our cross. That in order to be faithful disciples, we must be ready and willing to die. Oh, we dance around that issue, claiming that we must die to our old unhealthy way of life. But inside we are frightened to consider the alternative – does he really mean we must die?

Well, our Gospel writer, Mark, meant it literally. He wrote to the early Christians in a time of persecution and he wanted them to know that it was worth risking and losing your life to follow Christ. Mark knew the ending, which holds the key to the paradox – because Jesus suffered and died on the cross, but rose again, death has been conquered. Therefore, we must give our lives in order to attain true life. This is the Good News of Mark's Gospel – death can be the way to life.

Part of the reason that Jesus' message was hard for the disciples to understand is that they didn't know the ending yet. And they had very different expectations, from what Jesus actually came to deliver. They were still waiting for the Messiah to ride in like a king, a warrior, and save them from the political persecution and hardship of their daily life. Once God sent the Messiah – life would be good, very good. But Jesus wasn't talking about being that kind of a Messiah, and he didn't want his disciples thinking in those earthly terms either. The "Get behind me, Satan!" line may have been hyperbole, but it was surely meant to shake the disciples up – like a slap on the cheek or some cold water – "pay attention! This is not like everything else! This is very different!" Stop thinking in your old ways! The version of Messiah that Jesus embodied was one that did hang on a cross and die. But it also rose again. And the life he calls us to is not one necessarily of literally carrying a heavy wooden cross, although we joke that we sometimes feel that way.

The cross we are called to carry is one of submission, of death to our old lives, of setting aside our will and our choice and following God. It is also one of transparency, of vulnerability, of humility. Through the cross of submission, we are called into our humanity. We are reminded again that we are human, and we are not God. And we must learn to be OK with that. We must become comfortable with our weakness, with our vulnerability, with our human ungodliness. We must live into what it means to be fully human – the good and the bad, the gifts and the challenges, the strengths and the weaknesses. And as we embrace our humanity and admit our vulnerability, then and only then can we follow Jesus as disciples on the way.

It is hard to admit our vulnerability and our weakness. We think people will lose respect for us. Our culture tells us that it is best to be strong, to count on no one but ourselves. To admit a weakness is to admit defeat, to fail. Ah, but we are human. We are not perfect. We need each other, and we depend on God. Sometimes the choice gets taken away from us. We become so sick or so overcommitted that we are unable to care for ourselves, and must depend on others to feed us, drive us, help us walk or get dressed or remember things. And if we can enter those situations with grace, people speak of what courage and strength we have. Other times we try to do it all ourselves, afraid to admit our vulnerability – and in the process of maintaining our pride, we push away those who love us most – just because they want to help. But we were designed to be interdependent. We are made in God’s image, yes, but also with a space that only God can fill, if we let it happen.

So who is this Jesus who demands so much from us? How can we best follow him?

Jesus is as Jesus does, the commentator states. He means that in Mark’s gospel account particularly, we can know who Jesus is by what he does. He heals, he feeds. He reconciles. He reaches out. He announces the Kingdom of God by embodying the Kingdom of God – by calling it into being as he lives it in his interaction with others.

And we name who Jesus is based upon our experience of what he has done or meant in our own lives. Our faith is based upon our personal experience. Jesus as friend, as counselor, as liberator, as healer.

And so to follow Jesus, to state who he is to us, we must act. We must live out our faith in our daily lives. Our actions will tell the story of who Jesus is. This is what it means to follow.

To allow ourselves to be vulnerable –to admit that we don’t have all the answers. To volunteer to teach Church School, or be a confirmation sponsor, or a participant in education for ministry – to sign up with a group and tell part of our faith journey, and hear and learn from others. To try to help those around us, even knowing it won’t solve world hunger or erase poverty. To live into the mystery of not knowing everything about God. And to follow Christ anyway – through our words and public proclamations, in our hearts, certainly, but also in our actions – to embody the gospel message in our lives so that others may come to know the good news. This is to follow the Messiah. This is to say who Jesus is. This is to be fully alive. This is to know joy. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*,

If we answer this call to discipleship, where will it lead us?
What decisions and partings will it demand?
To answer this question we shall have to go to him,
for he only knows the answer.
Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him,
knows the journey's end.
But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy.
Discipleship means joy.

Amen.