

September 13, 2009-09-16
Friendship United Church, Demorestville
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Mark 8: 27-38

Our lesson today has us on the road with Jesus travelling to Caesarea Philippi; the day Jesus asked two questions of the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replies with all of the usual historical suspects; all of the important historical figures he had heard people comparing Jesus to. Who wouldn't want to be placed in the ranks of Elijah and John The Baptist. People were on the right track. And then to answer the second question, Who do YOU say that I am? Peter has no doubt about his answer and very carefully but confidently says, "You are the Messiah".

I can only imagine that Peter would have thought that Jesus would be satisfied with his answer; after all this is what Jesus had been teaching them all along the journey. They had seen the miracles, witnessed the healings, opened themselves to the teachings; they had left their families and jobs behind and followed Jesus. There was no answer but this but after he has given the answer that he believes is the "right" answer Jesus goes off on an unexpected tangent.

Has that ever happened to you. You're asked a question, you reply with the answer you know to be correct and then the person asking the question goes off and you say to yourself, Ok so that was meant to be a rhetorical question. Rhetorical questions are often used to open a conversation because once the retort comes it is not what you were expecting; at least most of the time.

Do you think Jesus set Peter up? Was his question meant to open the conversation he wanted or needed to have with the disciples? Well, we can never know for sure but certainly Jesus has taken an opportunity to tell the disciples what the future holds for him, regardless of what others may think the role of the Messiah might be, Jesus is telling them the reality of the situation. And once again Jesus tells them to tell no one about him. Odd don't you think that Jesus is always telling people to keep it quiet; why?

Because it is complicated.

This passage is one of three times that Jesus tells the disciples and us today that he is walking toward Jerusalem literally and physically toward the cross and beyond. Jesus is not simply asking a question because he is interested in whether or not people are saying good things about him to feed his ego; he needs to know if the disciples are prepared for what is to come. Do they fully understand what it means to be a disciple of the Messiah? Imagine Peter's surprise when Jesus turns first with an order "not to tell anyone" and then says to him, "get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind NOT on divine things but on human things."

Now wait a minute, Peter of all people should have his mind set on divine things; after all he recognised the Messiah in Jesus. He is Jesus' closest advisor; Peter is in on everything that Jesus has done. Wouldn't Peter be the last person Jesus should say this to?

Jesus goes on to say, "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." Talk about your unexpected answers. I suppose Peter and the others should have known Jesus well enough by this point to realize he is not going to give them some kind of Sally Field type response of "they like me; they really like me!" of course not. Jesus' questions were always asked with a lesson attached to the end.

But to understand the lesson we must understand the meaning behind what has been said. Let's start with "Get behind me Satan. For you are setting your mind NOT on divine things but on human things." Poor Peter you have to feel sorry for the guy. His answer was correct theoretically, the rebuke from Jesus wasn't so much about his direct answer but rather what was behind his answer; does Peter's answer have any meat to it? Jesus knows that Peter has no idea what it really means to be the Messiah. Jesus knows that Peter's answer is not substantiated with anything, it is a surface answer. Peter has no idea that Jesus must face the authorities, suffer and die. Peter has no idea the terror that will fill his own heart when the soldiers come and take the Messiah away. Peter has no idea and cannot imagine denying that he knows Jesus.

Today if asked this question or a variation of it, what would your answer be? Would you understand what it would mean to claim Jesus as Messiah. Would your discipleship have depth and understanding? I don't think any of us and certainly very few would not hear Jesus say to us, Get behind me Satan. In other words you're not ready, you haven't learned enough, you still think with your human understanding. You don't know what it is to give up complete control of your life, to leave it in God's time and place.

Get behind me Satan is not Jesus calling Peter the devil as our minds might go to today, rather it is Jesus saying to Peter, follow me; get behind me, learn from me. Start thinking in the divine way, not the human way. Use your God self not your human self.

Never is this so important or evident as later on when Jesus is confronted with and arrested by the Roman soldiers and Peter denies Jesus not once, not twice but three times on the way to the cross. Who do you say that I am? Peter is quick to answer Jesus with the "correct" answer now in the safety of his own circle but not so quick when the soldiers ask, who is this man? Peter's very human answer is, I don't know; and once again Peter is setting his mind on human things rather than divine things.

Then there is the matter of the cross. "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

The cross in ancient times meant two things: first it was a sure death and second it was an instrument of oppression and power. The cross was the cruellest form of being put to death. To be hung on a cross meant to die of suffocation. The weight of the body hanging caused the victim to suffocate. A person on the cross was completely powerless. In many cases their legs were broken first so they could not hold themselves up and the nails were often driven through the ankles to prevent any movement of the feet. Powerless.

The cross as an instrument of oppression and power was a visible reminder to the entire city of what happened to people who tried to out-power or over-power the leaders by breaking the law. Crosses lined the outer roadway into the city so all coming into the city limits would know what happens to those who break the law. It was the ultimate show of power for the rulers because it showed human limitations – the end of our ability to determine our own future, the end of control of our own lives, the end of whatever we tried to do on our own.

To take up our cross means that we face our limitations, we recognize our inability to control, our powerlessness to do it on our own. Jesus too faced these very same things. He gave up control to the oppressors who would kill him on a cross. Powerless and alone, or so it seemed to those who knew Jesus as the Messiah. This shouldn't happen to the Messiah why isn't he saving himself? Why hasn't he moved his army in and taken over? Why doesn't he show his power now?

Perhaps this is why they were not to tell that Jesus was the Messiah. It is not until after the resurrection that Jesus says go and tell what you have seen. The power of the Messiah comes later after the cross. Jesus may have thought that the people would stop following at the cross if they knew he was the Messiah when he did not save himself. It was important for the followers to follow beyond the cross

If we stop following Jesus here it is over but as Christians we don't stop here we move to Easter morning when this powerless death becomes the answer to our question.

Because we follow Jesus beyond the cross the answer that we give regarding who Jesus is goes deeper than the label of Messiah. Jesus is the one who conquered death and therefore conquered the power of our limitations. Following Jesus beyond the cross means that we too can move beyond our limitations with God's help.

The first step in many recovery programs is to admit to yourself and others that you are powerless over your disease and so you give it over to God. Take up your cross and follow me Jesus said; follow...don't try to run ahead; follow.

Perhaps it can be summed up in one of those rotating emails that pops up every once in a while; I have printed it off and have it hanging in my office. It goes like this...

Live simply, love generously, care deeply, speak kindly...Leave the rest to God.