

Sermon February 28, 2021 The Second Sunday in Lent

Today's word of the Lord in Mark chapter eight has three parts. First, Jesus leads his disciples to make a confession of faith in him. Second, Jesus sets the record straight on the nature of his messiahship. Third, Jesus teaches us what is involved in believing in him as Messiah and then following him in our lives.

In this reading, we find Jesus and his disciples in a city called Caesarea Philippi. This city was named after both the Caesar in Rome and Phillip the Tetrarch, the son of Herod the Great. The city was set in the foothills of Mt. Hermon, about two days walk from the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee. Caesarea Philippi was known as an important center for pagan worship, especially the god Pan. Cut into the rock on the side of the hill where the city sat were numerous grottos, or shines, to Pan as well as a number of other pagan gods. This was probably the location where the disciples and Jesus were standing when Jesus puts the question to his disciples,

"Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. Mark 8:27-30

Way to go, Peter! As the spokesperson for the other eleven, Peter always had something to say; good, bad, or indifferent. This time he hit the nail on the head. Of all the views people held on the true identity of Jesus, Peter got it right. But not so fast. There is more to Jesus than his identity. We must get on to his purpose. Jesus continues,

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Mark 8:31-32

Poor Peter. Always so enthusiastic, yet so often missing the mark! The disciples' viewed Jesus as the one who would bring them and their people earthly gain including their own religious-based government with no foreign taxes, doctrinal purity, and supreme prosperity. These all sound good. However, what humanity

needs most – eternal peace with God and each other - cannot be accomplished with perfect government, a corner on knowledge, and wealth and riches galore. The problem with Peter’s thinking is a perfect government requires perfect people. Fail. True knowledge requires truthful people. Fail again. And, as Jesus says elsewhere, the love of money is the root of many evils, not goods. So, once again, well-meaning Peter gets it wrong. And Jesus really lets him have it, too.

But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Mark 8:32

In one breath Jesus says Peter is the rock on which he will build his church. Shortly after, Jesus points his finger and renames Peter, “Satan.” Ouch! Point taken. For Jesus, this is serious business. There’s absolutely no room whatsoever for multiple viewpoints or interpretations concerning the life and work of the good Lord!

Jesus’ accusation is that Peter is thinking in human terms and from a perspective that is still from “here below.” Jesus is “from above,” so it follows that he might have a different view than the disciples at this point on how best to help his fellow man. And he does indeed have a different view. Jesus explains,

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” Mark 8:34-38

There’s that part again about the wrong headedness of thinking lots of wealth will automatically make life better. But Jesus does not stop there. He takes it all the way home. He insists that the best way to make things better is for us to die. Say what? Come again? Once again now? You’ve got to be kidding, right? Nope. Jesus says Death is the way to a better life. I guess its time to do some more explaining.

Peter’s mistake can help us see what Jesus means here. Peter’s perfect world for his people would include self-governance, the notion that their positions on

religion and philosophy were all complete and correct, and that they would be rolling in the dough. Now let's take that down to the individual level. What does this solution look like on a personal level? We would each be self-governed, always be right, and be wealthy far beyond what we really need to cover the necessities of life plus a little extra for fun. You know what? I think I just described a sinner. Sinners always want it their way, always know best, and have a continual desire for more possessions. These features, unleashed on a grand scale, personify every despot, evil totalitarian, and megalomaniac. On a reduced scale, they describe us.

Jesus has come to deliver us from the bondage of a sinful heart. To be delivered, we must die. That is, the old sinful self must die. Only when it is out of the way can the new self, recreated in Christ, emerge. This is anathema to the old nature. It is the last thing it wants. It will try to wriggle out of it until its dying breath to escape its ending. We know it. We feel it in every internal struggle inside us.

Jesus did not come just to leave a nice, selfless example for us to follow. He came with the intent that we would die and be reborn into his likeness. That means we exchange our sovereignty for his. We trade what we thought we knew for his truth. We relinquish our claim on every atom of our material life and become diligent managers of what God has entrusted to us. This means certain death for the sinful self. It means life for the new self God gives us as we come to him in repentance and faith.

It's no wonder these kinds of readings from the Bible come to us at this time of year – as we find ourselves in the season of Lent. We can't miss the season because it's just too obvious: Paczkis; Fat Tuesday; Ashes; Sad hymns; Midweek services; Fish fries. We can't miss that it's Lent. However, we can easily miss the meaning and intent of Lent, and its call for us to die that we might live again in the newness of Jesus Christ.

The risen Lord Jesus Christ empower and inspire you to deny your old self, take up your cross, and follow him! Amen.

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