

Sermon for September 15, 2024
Highland Presbyterian Church
Sermon texts: Mark 8:27-38, Isaiah 50:4-9a
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It has been a while since we've heard Mark's Gospel together in worship. We've been in John and James, in the Psalms and Song of Songs. But all along, since way back in chapter 6, Jesus has been healing sick people and feeding hungry people. He has walked on water and sparred with religious elites. He rejected a Gentile woman's plea to heal her daughter, then relented when she pointed out the hole in his logic. He used his own spit to give sight to a blind man.

Jesus has been busy. And I tell you that because all of this has been leading up to our text today, preparing Jesus's followers for the moment when he will tell them the truth that will change everything, when he will issue an invitation that has the potential to transform the world and usher in God's realm of peace. Let's listen together now to our Gospel lesson, which comes to us from the Mark, chapter 8, from the Common English Bible translation.

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus and his disciples went into the villages near Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They told him, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets."

He asked them, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." 30 Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: "The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead." He said this plainly. But Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him. Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, then sternly corrected Peter: "Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts."

After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, "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. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for

their lives? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in the Father's glory with the holy angels."

Jesus employs a classic pedagogical move by asking his students to share first, before he reveals the lesson. I'll be doing this later today with the confirmands, so be prepared ;). He asks - who do people say that I am? I can practically hear the disciples, shouting over one another to prove they've been paying attention to the identities people have projected onto Jesus. Once they've settled down, he asks what they think. And in my mind's eye, I picture them all turning in unison to look at Peter, the one who so often acts or speaks up without considering that he might look foolish. "You are the Christ." Christos, The Anointed One, Hebrew messiach...messiah.

And then, Jesus commands them not to tell anyone about his identity, just as throughout Mark's Gospel he has often insisted that beneficiaries of his healing miracles keep them a secret. But this time, instead of vanishing in a cloud of dust, he goes on, because although Peter has named the right answer, Jesus knows Peter still does not truly understand. The question of Jesus's identity disrupts everything his followers know about power, about God's promise of liberation, about victory.

The Messiah is supposed to triumphantly free the Jewish people from bondage and oppression, not suffer and die at the hands of the state. And in this same moment, he reiterates his identity as The Human One, the Son of Man, an irrefutably human being. Peter, in his own humanity, is absolutely scandalized.

This is the first of three times that Jesus foretells his death and resurrection; three times the disciples misunderstand. But it is not only the 12 who are implicated here. After rebuking Peter for his misunderstanding, Jesus turns the invitation to the cross — and the invitation to discipleship — outward, to whoever might be listening. Through Mark, transmitted across generations, through interpretation and translation, embedded in countless contexts, he invites us, too.

"All who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save their lives," he proclaims.

If we listen too literally, it sounds ominous, contradictory, or even like a call to martyrdom and self-destruction. But here, the word "save" comes from Greek *sozo*, a word that conveys a sense of wholeness, repair, healing, and reconciliation. It has a connotation of being rescued from peril, delivered from evil forces or suffering.

And so when I hear this invitation, I imagine it to be something like: “all who lose their lives as they currently are because of me and because of the good news will be made well, whole, and reconciled in their relationship with God and creation, now and forever.”

And I don't mean to intellectually sidestep the question of eternal life, which preoccupies Jesus throughout the Gospels. But there is much to learn from the juxtaposition of Jesus proclaiming his identity and inviting people into discipleship. I believe that seeking to be blessed by the grace of the Anointed One and seeking to follow Jesus into living out our own total humanity as creatures made in God's Image are the same hope, the same work. The late Black liberation theologian James Cone addresses this powerfully in his seminal book, *God of the Oppressed*, tying together God's promised salvation with liberation from political and social oppression for Black people.

“There is no liberation without transformation, that is, without the struggle for freedom in this world. There is no liberation without the commitment of revolutionary action against injustice, slavery, and oppression. Liberation then is not merely a thought in my head; it is the sociohistorical movement of a people from oppression to freedom—Israelites from Egypt, black people from American slavery. It is the mind and body in motion, responding to the passion and the rhythm of divine revelation, and affirming that no chain shall hold my humanity down.”

This is evident, Cone asserts, in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels. In the Hebrew texts, “salvation is identical with God's righteousness in delivering the oppressed from political bondage — a historical event of rescue.” In the Gospels, Jesus's message centered on the proclamation of liberation for the poor, and his actions revolved around healing, feeding, and protecting people. Cone writes: “Jesus did not regard salvation as an abstract, spiritual idea or a feeling in the heart. Salvation is the granting of physical wholeness in the concreteness of pain and suffering.”

To take up our cross and follow Jesus is not to seek some external or future reward or to claim for ourselves the eternal reconciliation which only God's grace, not our actions, can accomplish. It's also not an invitation to self-victimization. Theologian William Placher notes: “Seeking to be persecuted is a form of pathology, not a way of following Jesus. One simply does what is right, helps those who need help, stands up for the truth even when it is unpopular.” If we take Cone's view, not only is taking up one's cross not a cosmic “kick me” sign, it is actually a refusal of the

dehumanization foisted upon oppressed people, and an antidote to the degradation of the self that is inherent in oppressing and persecuting others.

Cone writes: “The victory in Jesus’ resurrection is God’s liberating act that makes possible human reconciliation with God. We have been given the gift of freedom to fight with God in the liberation struggle. We can now be reconciled with God because God has removed the conditions of alienation as represented in the powers of evil.”

This is the victory Jesus foretells when he explains who he really is – the Anointed One and The Human One, both inextricably. It’s not a contradiction but rather a perfect whole. In his verbal sparring with Peter, Jesus conveys, “I am telling you who I am really meant to be, not who the world means for me to be.” And then he asks his followers and passersby: will you be who you were really meant to be, too?

When we seek to know Jesus, we come to know ourselves, in all our own wild contradiction and potential. We can’t take up the cross when we’re burdened by our earthly pretensions of power, by wealth, or by fear. We cannot be disciples with one hand and oppressors with the other. Jesus invites us to lay those burdens down and discover ourselves as bearers of his cross and sharers of love.

Through Jesus, God knows who we are and cares about what we do. We are already children of the God who liberates, who offers wholeness, who saves. Grace is already at work. God’s realm is already present, just out of view. Discipleship means living those sacred truths in our bodies and communities, with our time and our resources, so that we can tear down the veil between our world of suffering and death and God’s promise of peace, reconciliation, and life abundant.

It's not simple, and it won't happen all at once. But claiming our longing is a start. If we trust God to shape our hearts, if we trust that through faith and through community we will have what we need, we're halfway there. It's the work of our lives, and it's the work of the church. The world will throw everything at us to slow us down and turn us back toward fear and power-seeking. But friends — love is already greater. Thanks be to God.