

“A Cross in the Road”
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Mark 8: 27-38

Jesus asks the disciples what people are saying about who he is. Then he lays out what it means to follow him. Listen for and hear God’s word to us in these words of scripture.

Mark 8: 27-38

We’re all familiar with Robert Frost’s poem about coming to a path in the woods and having to make a decision which path to take. He says that he chose the one less traveled and that his choice made all the difference in his life. Well, in our story today, the disciples and Jesus have come to that place in their life together.

Jesus and the disciples have been going along, O.K. to this point. He’s been preaching, teaching and healing. They’ve been soaking it all up—good, attentive students that they were. He asks them about the gossip on the streets. Jesus wants to know what people are saying about him. Then, all of a sudden, Jesus asks them a question and everything changes. Jesus asks them, “who do you think I am”?

Wouldn’t you know it would be Peter who jumps in first to answer the question! Peter, who speaks first and thinks later; Peter, who wants so desperately to show off what he’s learned; it’s Peter who shouts out his answer. “You are the Christ!” And Jesus tells him to tell no one.

Can you imagine how frustrated Peter must have been! He got the answer right, but he couldn’t tell a soul. And then to make it even worse, Jesus starts talking about having to suffer and die. He kept going on about all he would have to endure; and Peter couldn’t hold it in any longer. He had to tell Jesus he was wrong. He had to make him understand that that wasn’t the way it was supposed to work. Messiahs were supposed to vanquish foes, not be vanquished by them. He had to make Jesus see...

All of a sudden Jesus yelled at him. “Get behind me Satan”. It was at that moment that everything changed.

Wilimon says: “And then Jesus careens into our culturally-formed expectations, obliterating any notion of a Christianity that affirms a God who becomes the frosting on a feel-good life, adding a dash of ‘Jesus’ to make things that much better, or giving us another shove—in the same direction we’re bent on going. We’re like Peter, assuming we’ve got Jesus figured out, that we know what is best for him and us. How dare he tamper with our well conceived plans! But as William Sloan Coffin says, “Scripture is not around for anyone’s protection.” Jesus roars at us from the pages of scripture, speaking of dreadful, painful, and glorious things, cross, suffering, self-denial—the way to life.” (Pulpit Resource, p.52)

This is the cross in the road—literally and metaphorically. The disciples have been traveling a path with Jesus that they thought would take them to Jerusalem in a chariot followed by legions of soldiers ready to take on all Rome could throw at them. Instead Jesus tells them that he's taking a different road, one that leads to a cross. Jesus tells them this revolution will be different. It will be “unlike any other in the world's history, the only revolution that will truly succeed. God will reclaim the world not through violence, but through suffering, death, through the scandal of a crucifixion. The warriors in this battle will not be identified by victory, but by active discipleship, cross-embracing pain. The weapons will not be armor and sword, but self-denial and suffering. The cross will mark success.” (Pulpit Resource, p.52)

Poor Peter! He got it right and wrong at the same time, just as we often do. He knew who Jesus was, but he couldn't grasp all that Jesus was going to do. Ralph Milton says: “We just don't take seriously how counter-cultural the gospel is.” (Rumors, p.2) We, who have grown up in a secular Christian society, don't completely understand the gospel message either. I say secular Christian because our society displays some of the trappings of Christianity, but never fully gets it right. We talk about God a lot. God's name is on our money, mentioned in our constitution and declaration of independence. God's name is declared in our pledge of allegiance, invoked at many public gatherings, and claimed by roughly 80% of our citizens. Christmas and Good Friday are public holidays, but the lowest church attendance days. I could go on and on, but I think you've gotten my point. It's easy to be a secular Christian—to say we believe in God, to celebrate Christmas and live by the values of society. But it's hard to be a follower of Jesus, especially if it means heading for the cross.

Peter thought he had it right, so do we. Peter thought he could ride the Jesus train and everything would be wonderful. But Jesus wouldn't let him delude himself any longer. Jesus spelled out for them what discipleship would entail. And it wasn't pretty. Following Jesus would mean going to the cross with him. It would mean fighting the powers and principalities Jesus' way.

Discipleship in 2009 is difficult. The way of the cross says it's not enough to be part of a secularized society. Following Jesus means making a difference in the world. Sometimes that means confronting evil and injustice, sometimes it means speaking up when no one else is speaking. Sometimes, being a disciple means taking the less traveled path—the one that makes all the difference. It means actively working for justice, working for peace, working in places we'd rather not go. It means ministering to the forgotten, the marginalized in society, the ones who Jesus loves. Like Peter, we'd like to try to correct Jesus—to tell him that's not the way life works. We'd like to make him understand that there are easier ways to get through life—being good people should be enough. But Jesus won't listen, Jesus won't stray from the path God chose for him.

On this first Sunday of the program year, just as we're getting back into our familiar routines, the last thing you want to hear is that we've come to a crossroads where we have to make a choice. As a faith community and as individuals, Jesus is calling to us. He's asking us; “Who do you think I am?” He wants to know if we're going to follow

him, even when the road gets rough—even if where we're going makes us uncomfortable—even if it requires more from us than we've ever given before. Jesus is looking into our eyes, seeing into our souls, challenging us to a life of service in his name. Are we willing to pick up the cross—his cross—and follow?

I pray that we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.