

**September 16, 2018**  
**17th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Mark 8:27-38**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**  
**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Shippensburg**

Today's gospel scene from Mark resembles a stopover on a political campaign, where the candidate and his entourage are checking on the results of their focus groups along the way. There's been so much speculation, lots of chatter at the water cooler. They say he's a teacher. A healer. An exorcist. A miracle worker. But did you hear? He's not very well respected in his own hometown of Nazareth.

People were saying all kinds of things about Jesus. People always have, and will continue to say all sorts of things about Jesus. The disciples report on the word from the street. "Some say you're John the Baptist, come back to life. Others think you're the great prophet Elijah, returned. And some others think you are another in the line of our great prophets." All their answers suggest that most Galileans think Jesus is the forerunner of the Messiah. That's a safe bet. It's easier to believe a Messiah *will* come, than to believe one *has* come. A Messiah yet to come makes no demands, calls for no change.

Jesus listens, just taking in the disciples' report. Then he looks at them and says, "***But who do you say that I am?***"

Can't you just see it? The disciples' heads all drop, eyes to the ground, and they intently begin to study their feet. No one wants to be the first to make eye contact with Jesus.

Well, there always comes a time when what other people think and say is just not enough. It's Peter who finds his voice. He has allowed God to show him in his soul who Jesus is, so he breaks the awkward silence and speaks his truth: "***You are the Messiah***". Jesus insists they not share this with anyone. And then, for the first of three times in Mark's gospel, Jesus teaches them about what he expects is going to happen to him. Suffering, rejection, punishment, execution and death, and after three days, rise again.

Peter, who, just moments ago was so proud of his bold, heartfelt answer, is mortified. What is Jesus talking about? Everybody knows that the Messiah will be a mighty conqueror, casting off the oppression of the occupying forces of Rome. The Messiah will be the powerful one who fully restores Israel to prosperity, freedom, and peace.

Peter takes Jesus off for a side bar and privately calls him to task about this prediction of coming gloom and doom. And death? What good is a Messiah who dies? But Jesus is having none of Peter's challenge to what he has just told them. It must have been like a slap in the face then, for Peter to hear Jesus declare that he, in that moment, is allied with Satan, God's adversary. Peter is not thinking about God's perspective. He is thinking about his own human need for control, need to show strength and power, to save face, to protect Jesus' life, and his own life.

Anna Carter Florence says this passage is often known as "Peter's Confession", but a better title might be "How Peter worked up to a confession and once he'd made it realized the whole point was to revise it immediately." Peter gets the title right, but he doesn't understand what that title *Messiah* means to Jesus.<sup>i</sup>

It's a piercing and provocative question Jesus asks, "*Who do you say that I am?*" To attempt to answer it, we have to ask ourselves at the same time the question, "Who will I say that I am?" We can't answer Jesus' question without revealing who we are.

It takes time, persistent trial and error, and not infrequently tears, to learn what it means to be part of the loving, liberating, life-giving Jesus movement. We forget, fall down, and get up to try again, just like Peter. Always we will need to listen once more and learn what Jesus means: "*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.*" Peter and the other disciples, and all of us who have come after those first apostles, must let Jesus teach us what kind of Messiah he is. This is for the disciples, and often for us, an invitation to enter into a period of "deconstruction and reconstruction", as Mother Barbara describes this process.

Letting go of expectations is hard. It calls for grieving that which is lost, will not be possible. Jesus is not going to be a Messiah who will fight to win, but rather one to suffer and die. One who will serve, rather than conquer. Give rather than take. Love rather than hold anything back.

This being a disciple, a learner, an apprentice of Jesus' way is not anything that comes naturally to us. It is not logical. Little wonder that so few choose to follow. *But isn't it amazing that some people still do!* It's counter-cultural and counter-intuitive to everything we believe about what's important in life. Peter is disappointed and doesn't get the Jesus he wants, the Messiah anointed to reign in triumph, who would see to their comfort, contentment, and security, leave undisturbed their expectations of how life is supposed to be.

What Peter gets instead, is the Jesus he and the whole world needs, but don't know we need. A Messiah who models the way of downward mobility, of letting go, a servant Savior. Because this is not a victory story, but a servant story.

Trinity Episcopal Church, Chambersburg where I serve has lovely stained glass windows I've enjoyed meditating on in my time there. Most of the windows show significant events in Jesus' life. The window I find most fascinating and unusual is the window depicting an encounter which I have never seen displayed in any other stained glass window of a church. It is a scene of Jesus being tempted. Satan appears as a greenish, wild looking character with claws bared.

That window serves as a reminder that as a created human being, a man, Jesus more than once grappled with his own identity and the nature of his mission. Peter and the others object to and resist that impossible image Jesus describes, of a suffering servant, a dying Messiah. Because if this is how Jesus sees himself, then anyone who follows him will have to re-think who she or he is in relationship to THIS Jesus.

So what does it mean for us as 21<sup>st</sup> century followers of Jesus to "take up our cross"? It means taking into our hearts the life, death, and resurrected life of Jesus. It is to take the cross-shaped life into the core of our being, where we seek to live the vertical life of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we seek to live the horizontal life of loving our neighbor as we love our selves.

Taking up our cross does not mean we go looking for suffering, conflict, struggle and rejection. It does not mean we allow ourselves to be abused. But it does mean when we are trying to follow Jesus and the gospel, it should come as no surprise when we experience such hardships, for this is what happens when we do and say the things Jesus did. There will be opposition. When we find our voices and speak truth to power. When we stand with and advocate for the poor, marginalized, abused, vulnerable and defenseless ones. When we call for changes in unjust practices and laws that harm people, nations, and any part of God's created world.

Clinging to our own ways of self-preservation will not in the end bring us what we're looking for. Doing life "my way" may bring momentary pride, pleasure, power and privilege – but not abundant life as God intends. When by God's grace, we can let go of those thoughts, beliefs, and actions that do not mirror the love of God and neighbor, we allow ourselves to be emptied. This makes room in our soul for God to pour more and

more of God's self, coming to us in love, light, truth, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, peace, hope, delight and joy.

This past Friday, September 14th was the Feast of the Holy Cross, so I've been pondering the significance of the cross. "In the simple gesture of crossing ourselves, we open ourselves up for prayer, and for being a prayer ourselves. When we make the sign of the cross, we place a symbol of Jesus in front of our bodies so we can in a way, "see" the one whom we follow. In the sign of the cross, we declare the power of our baptism, not simply as a saving of our own soul, but for the salvation of the world. When we make the sign of the cross, we are lifting up Jesus to heal a broken world.

Here's an experiment to try this week. I invite you, if you are already in the habit of making the sign of the cross, to take a few extra moments over the next few days to simply use it to make room for a bit of prayer. If you are not in the habit, give it a try for a few days and pay attention to what you notice in your own body, or in your next step, or in the world right in front of you. Making the sign of the cross begs yet another question – how are we called to leave the sign of the cross on the bits and pieces of our day, as evidence of Christ's love and as a sign that "Jesus is here?" " ii

Blessings as you live the question of who Jesus is, day by day. Take heart and remember, we're not meant to "solve" Jesus once and for all. We're not meant to land. To arrive. To tidy and wrap up our discipleship neatly and keep it in a box with a pretty bow. We're meant to journey in community – together, and to keep loving and living the questions, until one day, we find ourselves living into the most wildly unexpected and grace-filled answers.

And now for us all, I offer this Franciscan prayer for cross-shaped living. Let us pray.

"May God bless us with discomfort – discomfort at easy answers, half- truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts. May God bless us with anger – anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace. May God bless us with tears – tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy. And may God bless us with foolishness – enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done. Amen. iii

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<sup>i</sup> Anna Carter Florence, September 16, 2018 sermon from the website *A Sermon for Every Sunday*.

<sup>ii</sup> Marie Evans, excerpt from "The Sign of the Cross", September 14, 2018 from the website *Episcopal Café*.

<sup>iii</sup> This is commonly referred to as "The Franciscan Blessing"