

Year B, Pentecost 16 (Between September 11 and 17 inclusive)
September 16th, 2018
Mark 8:27-38

A Love You Can't Escape!

Jesus and his disciples went into the villages near Caesarea Philippi, the city named after the most powerful human on earth at that time. It's a place where minds dance with images of Caesar's power, where the will of the powerful occurs at will. Dreams of God-like power also animate the disciples as they picture themselves special agents on God's redemption team. The idea is intoxicating.

As they walk Jesus asks "Who do people say that I am?" They reply "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets." Everyone is trying to decide who Jesus is and they draw on familiar categories to describe him.

John the Baptist was a first century televangelist-type who had recently been executed by the Rome-empowered governor, Herod. Maybe Jesus was his ghost returned to continue his work. Think of it as a headline of the National Inquirer in the grocery store checkout lane.

Or maybe Jesus was Elijah, the 9th century BC prophet who did miracles, called down fire from the sky and went to heaven in a whirlwind. Many people believed this fearsome cultural hero would return just "before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." Maybe they were living in this great and terrible day and Jesus was Elijah finally come.

Or perhaps Jesus was one of the prophets—those poets and thinkers who painted a vision for God's justice and sparked human imagination toward the way things ought to be. In this scenario I think of him as like our modern artists and scientists who continually warn us of the impending, and already upon us, environmental crisis seen in fire and flood.

Jesus continues "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" We have come to the heart of Mark's gospel. A silence descends as each disciple thinks how to respond. Finally Peter answers. "You are the Messiah." Jesus neither confirms nor denies Peter's assertion. Instead "Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about him."

This response surprised me. I was expecting a "good for you Peter. You got it right. Spread the word" but instead Jesus imposes a gag order. Why did he do that? Like everyone, they think the Messiah, who has just revealed himself to them, will rule the way Caesar rules only with more power because he is from God. Jesus must hold them back from talking about this for they have totally misunderstood what Jesus is doing and how he will do it. If they talk they will only spread misinformation. Their tongues will set off forest fires of Jewish nationalistic fervor and no love, forgiveness or reconciliation will come from those hot embers.

What Jesus says next is totally incomprehensible to them. “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.’” Mark’s gospel then adds “He said this plainly.” He used common, matter-of-fact words to convey this so that they would know he was not speaking in metaphor or symbolic language. He meant exactly what he said. He himself had already accepted this as the only way forward. He would die to reveal the depth of human brokenness shown in the way we destroy each another. He is not placating an angry God, he is revealing the hidden root of violence in all human cultures and it isn’t pretty. His willingness to do this reveals a God of love far beyond their imaginations.

Suddenly the disciples have been pulled back from visions of a Jewish Caesar, their ancient dream come true: retribution for all the abuse, taxation and humiliation they have suffered at the hands of Rome to the image of a vulnerable Messiah who dies at the hands of their own religious leaders and political enemies and then somehow rises from the dead. This is impossible, incomprehensible, and very alarming.

Peter grabs hold of Jesus and scolds him in an attempt to set him straight. Jesus is saying things that frighten Peter. Jesus has just placed Peter’s identity, self-understanding and way of life under threat. He must get Jesus to reverse his position. You can’t be a Jewish Caesar this way!

Jesus must now publicly offend Peter to snap him out of his fantasy and back into a reality Peter does not want to see. “Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, and sternly corrected Peter. “Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.”

Peter is thinking the way we humans do. His categories are power, coercion and the peace that comes from the imposition of our will over those we consider wrong, dangerous or inferior. But this is not God’s way.

“He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’” There is nothing coercive about this. It is all invitational.

Everything in Peter wants to have power and not be vulnerable. If Peter wishes to follow Jesus he must deny in himself that need for power, dominance and the capacity to visit revenge on those he sees as opposing or oppressing him. He must deny himself the pleasure of tit-for-tat, the violent response that will teach them a lesson. Someone makes us angry or blocks us with their power and we want to punish them—to make them suffer. Everything in us wants to do that. That’s what we have to give up. An example: the authorities have come to arrest Jesus. Peter pulls out a sword and cuts off the ear of one of the soldiers. Jesus tells him to put his sword away and then heals the soldier’s ear.

Jesus goes on “Those who want to save their lives will lose them.” To look at this on a national level, every country sets up a national security system to defend itself against its neighbors. In the service of security every nation sends their young people to fight other young people from other nations who are also sent in the service of security. This is just how humans work. We each want to save our lives but in the end we lose our lives. Jesus encapsulates this with “All who want to save their lives will lose them.” The key here is our desire to save our lives rather than allowing God to save us. It’s when we let go and trust that we discover a salvation that has been there all along.

Jesus goes on “But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them.” When we align ourselves with God who does not punish or kill and who loves all his children, we know at a profound level that all lives are deeply valued. We also know we are so valued that God has given us an “ongoing-ness” stretching beyond physical death.

Jesus calls us all into question when he asks, “Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives?” Will they give up violence? Will they give up the things that lead to violence?

This is the center of Mark’s gospel, the heart of what Mark wants to tell us. It challenges us to the core and forces us to decide who we think Jesus is. Is he the Son of God who shows us the face of God? If we embrace him, we may struggle with shame for we know many will call us naïve, gullible and even weak. Embrace him anyway.

Jesus said, “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.”

Even if we are ashamed of Jesus we will still be loved, it’s just that Jesus will be ashamed of us when he presents us to God. But he will still love us. Don’t you hate a love like that? You can’t escape it! Amen.