

Proper 19B: Mark 8:27-38  
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### **Not That Kind of Messiah**

Two Australian sailors came ashore in a boat in London. They decided to have a drink and found their way into a pub not too far away. But while they were drinking and getting drunk, the unpredictable London weather struck. Fog descended, making it difficult for them to find their way back. As they staggered out of the bar, they got lost. After some time, they heard the footsteps of a man walking towards them. As he emerged from the shadows, they saw that he was a highly decorated British naval officer. They asked him- "Ai, mate, do you know where we are?" The man looked at these two drunken men for a moment and said, "Do you know who I am?" The two men looked at one another and said to themselves- "We are really in trouble now. We don't know where we are, and he doesn't know who he is."

This morning's Gospel lesson is all about *who Jesus is*. But in order to grasp the answer we have to know *where Jesus and his disciples are*.

Jesus and the disciples, Mark tells us, have arrived at some villages outside of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was a relatively new city built on the slopes of Mount Hermon. Caesarea was named after the Roman Emperor and was a imperial administrative outpost and thus a symbol of Rome's power and authority. Caesarea was also the site of a famous shrine to the pagan god Pan. Those desiring to "divine the future" would go to a grotto in the mountainside, where it was believed you could hear the voices of the souls in Hades bubbling up from below. So not only was Caesarea symbolic of worldly power, but it was also redolent of pagan belief and superstition.

So the setting just oozed idolatry and power politics. In fact, you couldn't have found a place that better symbolized the ways of the world, the ways of brute force, of the exploitation of the weak, of "might makes right." It's no small thing then that it was *here* that Jesus stops and asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" I mean, it would have been one thing for Jesus to ask the question in some quiet village in Galilee, but it's quite another matter to ask it in Caesarea, amidst the idols and in the shadow of worldly power and all that goes along with it. The setting transforms Jesus' question from a question of curiosity into a question loaded with implications. Who do you say that I am?

Simon Peter jumps at the chance to answer Jesus' question, and declares Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ. Now, you'd think Jesus would applaud and commend Peter for his insight, but he doesn't. Rather, he tells them to keep his identity a secret. He then goes on to explain just what he as the Messiah was going to do. And it's not what they expected. You see, when Peter called Jesus the "Christ," he wasn't thinking of Jesus as God Incarnate, the Son of God, come down from heaven to die for their sins. That's how we understand the title "Christ," "Messiah" now, after Jesus. But, for Jews in Jesus' day, the Messiah was expected to be an anointed military leader, a warrior-king, who would come like the heroes of the Old Testament to deliver

Israel from their oppressors, the Romans, and restore Israel to its former glory. That's what the Jews of Jesus' day were expecting. But that was not what Jesus was going to do, as he makes bluntly, plainly, explicitly clear.

Jesus says that he would “undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

Knowing what the Messiah was *supposed* to do, Peter's protest makes sense: “No! No, Jesus. This can't be what happens. This movement you've started, it's really taking off. Before long, we'll have enough people that we can start to put some serious pressure on Rome, get them to leave.”

Peter, it's clear, wants a strong God...and who can blame him? Are we any different? When the crushing weight of hardship bears down upon us, when someone does us wrong or blames us unjustly, when the world seems aligned against us, don't we also want a strong God to avenge our hurts, to right all wrongs, and to put us back on top of things? As Robert Capon wryly observed, our kind of Messiah wouldn't do a stupid thing like rising from the dead. He would do a smart thing like never die.

But Jesus tells his disciples that's not the kind of Messiah he is. That's not how God works. That understanding of the Messiah, as this warrior-king, that way of thinking...well, “It's the devil,” as people used to say, and it needs to get out of the way. “Get behind me, Satan,” he says.

Fact is, we live in a world filled with a multitude of options of how to make sense of our lives, multiple ways to live, paths to follow, gods to worship. The thing that all these other ways have in common is that they are all ego-centric. They all have at their foundation a focus on the self, how can *I* get ahead, how can *I* get more, how can *I* acquire more power, more money, more pleasure.

Against this, Jesus sets out a very different ethic: “If anyone wants to be my follower, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.”

This is a striking statement, and one which is packed full of implications. To grasp them, we need to take each of those lines in turn.

Jesus begins, “If anyone wants to be my follower...” You don't hear it in English but in the original Greek, Jesus is referring back to what he said to Peter a few verses before. He told Peter, to “get *behind me*,” and here he says, “if anyone wants to follow *behind me*...” The *behind me* part is redundant—following someone necessarily means you're behind them. But Jesus adds it for emphasis. The point he seems to be making is that Peter was trying to get out in front of Jesus, to get in his way, being an obstacle to God's work. But if we truly want to get in on what Jesus is doing, we need to follow *behind him*. Some people today talk about being “on the right side of history.” But as we see here, it's far more important to be *on the right side of Jesus!* Behind him, not in front of him....

Jesus continues, explaining what it means to follow behind him. It means “denying ourselves and taking up our cross.” For many Christians, these phrases have been quoted so many times they’ve become clichés. And as a result, their meaning has become distorted. This happens in both directions. On the one hand, we trivialize them when we talk about something being “our cross to bear,” in reference to the ordinary sufferings associated with life— things like pain and disappointment. On the other, we exaggerate its meaning when think taking up our cross means we have to make a heroic sacrifice, or else embrace austere asceticism. But those are misinterpretations.

You see, a cross was an instrument of torture that eventually lead to a painful death, yes. But it was also a sign of ridicule as the criminal was forced to carry it through the town while people would laugh and hurl insults or worse at the condemned man. It was about humiliation, shame, and being completely unable to protect yourself. For when you are carrying a cross, you’re hands are occupied. You can’t defend yourself from attacks or insults. You’re vulnerable, exposed.

And none of us likes being vulnerable! Being vulnerable can be scarier than even dying. We’d do anything to prevent ourselves from having to be at the mercy of others. Best to protect ourselves, keep others at a safe distance and always have an exit strategy—so badly do we not want to be vulnerable.

How often in relationships do people really give themselves, or hold back, protecting or saving themselves? A book from ages ago by John Powell had the title: *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* The answer given in the book is: "I am afraid to tell you who I am, because, if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it's all that I have." So, rather than risk being hurt, we don't tell others who we are. Problem is, in trying to protect ourselves from pain, we lose ourselves. We pretend. We put on a show. We become non-selves in our relationship with others. A relationship between two pretend people, though, isn't much of a relationship – even if both are somewhat protected from getting deeply hurt.

This helps to shed light on what Jesus says next: “Those who want to save their selves will lose them, and those who lose their selves for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save them.” In our effort to not risk being hurt, to not risk ourselves, we lose ourselves anyways. In our efforts to protect our lives, we end up never really living.

Brené Brown is probably the person who knows the most about vulnerability today. As a researcher, she has studied vulnerability more than anyone and has written several books on vulnerability and our efforts to protect ourselves. In *Daring Greatly*, she writes, “Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.”

In other words, we can’t escape being vulnerable. The only question is, what do we do about it? As Brown suggests, it’s a question of engagement. The call to take up our cross is a call to be vulnerable, to face up to hardship without running away or protecting ourselves or blaming

others, a call to stay engaged, stay connected, and be authentic and honest about who we are, who we follow, the God we worship. Such engagement, such authenticity and honesty, such daring, defines the life of Jesus and is to define the life of those who follow him.

It's easy, I know, to confess Jesus here in church, surrounded by other believers and symbols of our faith. But, it's another matter to confess Jesus outside church, where it seems the whole world looks down on you and calls you names, assuming there must be something wrong with you for believing. In that context, being Christian, following Jesus, is a lot harder. But it presents a much more powerful witness.

And so we see the question of where are we, who are we, and what kind of life we should live all come together, come together in Jesus. And as strange as it sounds, Jesus' calling for us to take our cross, to deny ourselves, is not a sentence to suffering and death. It is actually an invitation to life, to true life, to live fully, to live wholeheartedly, to risk ourselves as he did, to live fully and honestly for him. That is an invitation and a promise, to find true and full selves in him, in following, living the way Jesus did. Thanks be to God!