

Sunday February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Lent II

Mark 8:31-38

“What Does it Mean to Deny Yourself?”

I hope you enjoy this little story as much as I do. It concerns a bagpipe player from Newfoundland or as they say on the Big Rock, a Newfie Piper. The story is told in the first person, so these are the piper’s words...

*As a young piper, I was asked by a funeral director to play at a grave-side service for a homeless man, with no family or friends. The funeral was to be held at a cemetery way back in the country, and this man would be the first to be laid to rest there. As I was not familiar with the backwoods area, I became lost; and being a typical man did not stop for directions. I finally arrived an hour late.*

*I saw the backhoe and the crew, who were eating lunch, but the hearse was nowhere in sight. I apologized to the workers for my tardiness, and stepped to the side of the open grave, where I saw the vault lid already in place. I assured the workers I would not hold them up for too long, but this was the proper thing to do. The workers gathered around, still eating their lunch. I played out my heart and soul.*

*As I played the workers began to weep. I played, and played, like I’d never played before, from “My Home and The Lord is my Shepherd to Flowers of the Forest”. I closed the lengthy session with “Amazing Grace” and walked to my car. As I was opening the door and taking off my coat, I overheard one of the workers saying to another, “Lardy, Lardy, boy, I never seen nothin’ like that before and I’ve been putting in septic tanks for twenty years.”*

You don’t have to be a Newfie Piper to find yourself making embarrassing assumptions. How often do we walk into a certain situation, examine the observable information before us like: who is there, what we think they are doing, and immediately our brains fill in the holes. Making assumptions is behind all kinds of problems that plague mankind. Stereotypes of certain cultures, religions, skin colour or ethnicity are based almost exclusively on assumptions.

I happen to have experienced the sting of stereotyping: not because of my age, or that I am a white male or that I am Canadian; but because I am a Baptist minister. Thanks to television preachers, the historical experience some people have had with my predecessors, or because of what a friend of a friend has said about Baptist preachers, I meet people all the time who expect me to be a certain way.

It reminds me of the cute little incident that occurred on a bus where a lady leaned over to her seat mate and asked, “Are you a preacher?” To which the man replied, “No Madam, I’ve just been sick for a few days.” One of the greatest compliments I ever receive, is when I am getting to know people, and enjoying their company, and then observing their responses when they learn I am a Baptist preacher.

How wonderful to be so atypical in their minds that they don’t believe I am a preacher. Assumptions! We all make assumptions. We make them all the time, much to our embarrassment and most frequently, our assumptions come from our ignorance.

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Our gospel lesson today is all about assumptions, and it comes in the middle of a whole section of Mark that deals with assumptions. The passage read today occurs immediately after Jesus inquires of his disciples as to who the public says he is. In other words, what are the rumours?

The response from the disciples was that some people thought Jesus to be John the Baptist, others thought him Elijah and others thought him one of the other prophets. The public had been watching and listening to Jesus, and they were trying very hard to make sense of him by filling in the gaps in their understanding. No matter how much information the crowds obtained about Jesus and his ministry, they still had more questions than answers in trying to get an accurate picture.

But what about the disciples; they, after all, had been the ones closest to Jesus, and heard and saw things the crowds were not privileged to observe. Who do they say Jesus is? Peter speaks, at least for himself, but I believe he is sharing a consensus, "You are the Messiah." Way to go Peter; the Holy Spirit has revealed a great truth to you. However, this revelation of Jesus being the Messiah opens a whole new truck load of assumptions.

The greatest of these assumptions has to do with the nature of being the Messiah. Peter, and the other disciples, may have determined that Jesus was the Messiah; but they certainly did not understand what was entailed in this. We know from other places in the scriptures, that the disciples, and others, saw Jesus' coming to humankind as: political, or military in nature, and full of earthly glory.

Time, and time again, the twelve struggled to understand Jesus' aversion to: seeking attention, and performing miracles on demand, or his resistance to calling for an all-out military strike against Rome. Instead of picking up a sword, Jesus picked up little children. Instead of demanding personal glory, he washed his disciple's feet. Instead of explaining a path to being served, he explained how we must be the one's serving.

No wonder these disciples were so often confused. We like to look at their experience and think, "Gee, how could they be so dense?" However, let us not forget we are looking back at their experience. "Hindsight is always 20/20", we like to say. I am almost certain that if we had been one of the twelve, we would have been just as confused, and maybe we are still confused to this day about the nature of Jesus being Messiah.

All this unsettling confusion about the nature of Jesus, and then we walk head long into today's passage, and we are shaken to the core. Not only are many of our assumptions about Jesus wrong, but then he states that being the Messiah will ultimately lead to his suffering and death. The destiny of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, is to be tried, humiliated, and crucified in Jerusalem. According to Jesus, the Messiah must suffer to accomplish his mission.

The way of the Messiah is the way of the cross, and to follow him, is to follow him to the cross. The suffering nature of discipleship is at the very heart of Mark's gospel. Then Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly.

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And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." "Get behind me, Satan!"

It's a bit irreverent and certainly not scriptural but I have this mental picture of the disciples. It's several years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The disciples are together. They are talking about the good old days, laughing, teasing, and reminiscing the way friends who have shared a life changing experience often do. Then one of them looks at Peter and says, "Hey Satan, tell us about the day you rebuked Jesus!"

Another joins in, "Yeah, how'd that work out for you?" Another, "What were you thinking about, Peter?" Peter begins to speak, "You know I just didn't like the whole suffering and dying thing. I didn't get it. That's not what I signed up for. That's not who I thought the Messiah would be." The others become quiet. They recall that day like it was yesterday. They begin to realize that Peter didn't say anything they weren't thinking.

Maybe Peter didn't say anything we haven't thought or even wanted to say. Jesus has a very different understanding of discipleship than what most of us probably want. When another's reality and vision begin to conflict with and overtake our own, we rebuke. We take them aside to enlighten them, help them understand, show them the error of their ways. That's all Peter did.

If we are really honest haven't, we, at some point, disagreed with Jesus, asking why he doesn't do what we want? Why won't he see the world our way? It all seems so clear to us.

- If he can cast out the demons and silence the crazy guy in the synagogue surely, he could silence the voices that drive us crazy.
- If he can heal Peter's mother-in-law, why not those we love?
- If he can cleanse the leper, why does our life sometimes leave us feeling unclean and isolated?
- If he can make the paralytic walk why are so many crippled by fear, dementia, or addiction?
- If he can calm the sea surely, he could calm the storms of our world. Yet they rage on, violence, war, poverty.
- If he can keep Jairus' daughter from dying why not our children, our friends, our loved ones?

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- If he can feed 5000 with a few fish and pieces of bread, why does much of the world go to bed hungry?

I have wondered about these things. I have been asked these kinds of questions. I know some who have lost faith and left the Church over these things. These are our rebukes of Jesus. He is not being or acting like we want. Sometimes his words challenge and shock us. Maybe we're not so different from Peter.

Just a few verses before today's gospel Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter names him as "the Christ," the Messiah, the Anointed one of God. Jesus is the one of whom the prophets spoke, the one for whom Israel has waited, the one who was supposed to restore God's people. Peter is right and yet he also does not understand.

Peter has an image of what the Messiah is supposed to do and who the Messiah is supposed to be. We all have our own images and wishes about who Jesus is and what he should do. All is well when Jesus is casting out demons, healing the sick, preventing death, and feeding the multitudes. We like that Jesus. We want to follow that Jesus. He is our Lord and Savior.

Jesus will not, however, conform to our images of who we think he is or who we want him to be. Instead, he asks us to conform to who he knows himself to be. The one who "must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." He sets a choice before us. It is a choice we each must make. Again, and again the circumstances of life set that choice before us.

We either choose ourselves and deny Jesus or we deny ourselves and choose Jesus. "If any want to become my followers," he says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Self denial is the beginning of discipleship.

I suspect that is not what Peter had in mind when Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." I wonder if that is what we had in mind when we came to church today, or what we think about when we are baptized, or how often we understand and practice our faith as daily self denial.

Jesus' words are hard and his way extreme. Surely God did not covenant with his people and bring them out of Egypt into the promised land only to say, "Now let it all go." The Messiah is supposed to offer security, protection, and put Israel back on top. Faith in Jesus, Peter is learning, is not about the elimination of risks, the preservation of life, and the ability to control. Instead, Jesus asks us to risk it all, abandon our lives, and relinquish control to God. That is what Jesus is doing and he expects nothing less of those who would follow him.

The way of Christ, self-denial, reminds us that our life is not our own. It belongs to God. It reminds us that we are not in control, God is. Our life is not about us.

It is about God and there is great freedom in knowing these things. We are free to be fully alive. Through self denial our falling down becomes rising up, losing is saving, and death is resurrection.

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As long as we believe our life is about us, we will continue to exercise power over others, try to save ourselves, control our circumstances, and maybe even rebuke Jesus. Jesus rarely exercised power over others or tried to control circumstances. He simply made different choices. Self denial is not about being out of control or powerless. It is about the choices we make.

Jesus chose to give in a world that takes, to love in a world that hates, to heal in a world that injures, to give life in a world that kills. He offered mercy when others sought vengeance, forgiveness when others condemned, and compassion when others were indifferent. He trusted God's abundance when others said there was not enough. With each choice he denied himself and showed God was present.

At some point those kinds of choices will catch the attention of and offend those who live and profit by power, control, and looking out for number one. They will not deny themselves. They will respond. Jesus said they would. He knew that he would be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes. It happens in every age for those who choose the path of self denial. When it happened for Jesus, he made one last choice. He chose resurrection over survival.

And he turns to each one of us and says, "If any want to become my followers...."