

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana parish
St. Francisville, LA
16 September 2018

Mark 8:27-38

I love movies or great heroism. Just when a situation is the worst, innocent people are in great peril, and nothing seems to be going right, someone breaks into the scene to save the day. You have seen these movies -Your country's army is engaged in a losing struggle in the field of battle when, suddenly, a cloud of hooves rises in the east, and, to your relief, great warriors on war horses are seen in the distance approaching the scene, ready to save the day. This is the premise of shows like "Burn Notice" and "Leverage." In each of these shows, a team of highly trained people, takes on the cause of those who are in an absolute desperate state because they have been victimized by ruthless and cunning criminals. The plot is always the same. The innocent person is taken advantage of, threatened, beaten, robbed, or humiliated. In desperation, the victim turns to the avenger. And the avenger fights the battle for the innocent victim, turns the tables on the criminals, and finds a way to punish the guilty. We all love a good revenge story when a handsome superhero comes to save the day.

Today, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." These answers are a complement. Jesus has captured the imagination of the crowds with his words of wisdom and his mighty acts. His preaching style is reminiscent to the great prophets of all. People believe they are in the presence of a great preacher and teacher when they are with him. Then Jesus turns the table and asks the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" It is always easy to repeat what others are saying, it is an entirely different matter when you are speaking for yourself. Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." This is a remarkable statement, which I find very interesting for several reasons.

The Messiah was supposed to be a liberator who with great might would free Israel from the Gentiles and return her to her former glory. He was to accomplish this politically, by inspiring the people to take on arms and by guiding them to great victory. But, until now, Jesus hasn't done anything political. He has not preached against Caesar. He has not challenged the local Sanhedrin or City Council, he has avoided any critique of King Herod, and he has not gathered around himself any professional warriors and soldiers. In fact, his followers are just a band of tradespeople and fishermen. There is nothing about Jesus' behavior at this point to indicate that he is in fact the Messiah. Nonetheless, Peter has just made this affirmation in the presence of the other disciples. So, what do we make of this?

Perhaps Peter believes that as they set-out for Jerusalem, Jesus will come into his own and will begin to gather troops. Perhaps he believes that Jesus' full

vocation will only become a reality once they reach Jerusalem, when Jesus will come face to face with the powers of the empire. Peter may be harboring illusions that this Jesus of Nazareth will be the conquering hero they need and he is willing to stick with him until this glorious insurrection is over. These may also be the secret desires of the rest of the disciples. Jesus has another idea in mind, however.

“He began to teach them 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.” Jesus doesn’t seem to realize the importance of the Messianic role Peter sees in him. No one wants the great superhero to die at the end, at the hands of the same evil people he is trying to liberate innocent victims from. The hero is supposed to march in at the right time to save the day and usher in a time of endless progress and prosperity. This whole business about dying is a threat to Peter’s understanding of who Jesus is and how he should accomplish his mission. “Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Anyone who has read Genesis 3, will find Jesus’ words familiar. Adam and Eve set their minds on earthly things when the serpent inspires them to rebel against God. “This is one of those moments in Scripture that highlights the vast distance between us and God. Though Jesus is God with us, we cannot tame him or make him over into our image. We would like a savior who is a winner, and one who makes us winners, but Jesus insists on identifying with the lowliest of losers. He will allow himself to be judged and condemned as a blasphemer by Jewish religious leaders. He will allow himself to be mocked, tortured, and executed as a criminal by the Romans.” (Elizabeth Johnson, Working Preacher).

Jesus then calls his disciples and says 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.” Now, we often apply this passage to our own individual crosses: The care of sick children or parents, the drudgery of unfulfilling jobs, the family conflicts that often afflict our homes, etc. But, in this case, Jesus is not necessarily talking about our daily struggles, but rather, he is talking about our willingness to die, if necessary, to be his disciples. This was an important message because he knew the perils that would befall his disciples after his own death. He is not telling his disciples that they must seek out martyrdom. He did not idealize suffering for the sake of suffering. Rather, he warns them that suffering for the sake of the Gospel might be a possibility. Following him into Jerusalem could mean their death. There is no earthly prosperity in the plans. There is no great palaces and spoils of war. They will not become wealthy and powerful by following him. Most likely, they will encounter their death in the same way he will encounter his.

I am often humbled and shamed by this passage of Scripture. Many of us preachers go to our fancy seminaries, secretly hoping for great success and prosperity. Many of us want our 28-room mansions in the outskirts of Houston. We dream of being loved and followed by the tens of thousands who will flock to our churches. We follow a Messiah who will provide for us and our ministry the planes and helicopters we know we will need as we become the greatest preachers that ever lived. I do find great comfort, however, in the few that enter this profession seeking to follow a Messiah who leads us to the cross.

What Jesus is talking about is, "Losing our lives for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel. Taking up our cross means being willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences might be. It means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means being willing to lose our lives by spending them for others -- using our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others might experience God's love made known in Jesus Christ" ((Elizabeth Johnson, Working Preacher).

Unfortunately, the disciples were not prepared to loose their lives and abandoned Jesus when things became dangerous. They left him and denied him, allowing him to die as a common criminal. But, we who have read the rest of the story know that, at some point after the Resurrection, the disciples understand the full meaning of this mandate to be willing to give up their lives. They came face to face with the risen Christ and that encounter was sufficient for them to accept their new vocation. They soon became the greatest evangelistic force in the world, and through their courage and devotion, God created for himself a mighty Church.

We know that God rewarded Jesus' faithfulness to the end and we know that we who follow him will one day receive the gift of eternal life. We know we are future-bound and that nothing on the face of this earth has the power to separate us from the love of God in Chris Jesus, our Lord. But, we must realize that for now, we follow a Messiah that leads us directly to the cross and we know this cross has many forms and shapes, both for us individually and the Church itself. We who are followers must expect opposition and tribulation and we must be ready and willing to remain faithful to the very end. God has a mission for us to accomplish and He will be faithful to us to very end.

Let us pray that we might listen to the voice of God this very day and that we may commit the rest of our lives to follow where Jesus leads and to do the work he has given us to do, even in the face of uncertainty and even when a faith in Jesus Christ has become unpopular and even dangerous.

May God continue to bless us. Amen!