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16th Sunday after Pentecost – Mark 8:27-38
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Gospel: Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked 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.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then 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. 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.”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God the Father, and our Lord and Messiah, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If I were to come to your church today, how would you know who I am? I suppose my collar would be an obvious indicator that I am a pastor, but that is just one aspect that defines me. If you ask my 11-year-old daughter who I am, she will give a very different answer, as would my neighbors, or the clerk at the grocery store. We tend to identify others based on our interactions with them, or our preconceived notions based on the stories of other people’s encounters with that person. We tend to define who a person is based on our relationship (or lack thereof) with them.

That is what Jesus seemed to be getting at in today's Gospel lesson. He was walking along with his disciples, and he was curious how people were viewing him. He does the seemingly logical thing and asks those closest to him, "What's the word out on the street about me?" They reply with the current buzzwords about Jesus: "Some say you're Elijah, others John the Baptist, maybe even a prophet." Then Jesus got a little more personal, "Who do YOU say that I am?" Peter steps forward and boldly proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah.

The different perceptions of who Jesus was, were based on the interactions and conversations that the various people had with Jesus. For the general public, they probably heard about his miracles or possibly even witnessed some of the healings he performed, but their only frame of reference to define him came from previous knowledge or experiences with strong religious figures like Elijah and John the Baptist. The disciples, however, had spent a great amount of time around Jesus and were much more aware of the distinctions that rightfully set him apart as the Messiah. After being with him all those months, the disciples, or at least Peter, began to truly understand who Jesus was – well, maybe.

Now that Jesus' disciples had correctly pieced together his words and actions, which identified him as the Messiah, he began to reveal to them what this *truly* meant. In verse 31 of today's Gospel, it says, "Then 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." Whoa, whoa, whoa... Jesus just said what? The disciples may have begun to correctly identify Jesus as the Messiah, but that last statement was not part of their preconceived notion of what the Messiah was supposed to be like.

The long-awaited Messiah was supposed to be a great king, like David, who would lead the people of Israel back into their golden era. The Messiah was supposed to be a mighty warrior who would come and fight against the injustice

and oppression God's people felt living under foreign rule. The Messiah was *not* supposed to be a suffering weakling, who would be killed at the hands of the authorities. As Jesus often did, he took the disciples' predetermined concept of the Messiah and turned it around 180 degrees. Peter was so taken back by this idea that he tried to rebuke Jesus! This resulted in a verbal tongue-lashing, in which Jesus put Peter in his place by reminding him that this was God's plan, not theirs. This leads us to the next part of the story, where Jesus then told the disciples and the crowd, what it truly meant to be his disciple – which involved taking up their crosses and following him.

The cross was not an unfamiliar notion for the disciples, however, they didn't view it quite the same way that we do today, since we know how the story ends. For people in Biblical times, the cross was an instrument of torture and death. In this statement Jesus is bidding those who are listening to "come and die." This was a very different calling of discipleship than what they may have first heard, which was, "Come and I'll make you fishers of men," or "Come and help heal the sick and cast out demons." Those callings are a little more glamorous and safe – compared to this invitation to come and take up a cross.

The cross did not fit into Peter's preconceived definition of the Messiah. Peter had a bold faith in Jesus, which he proclaimed, but when Jesus' words and actions didn't fit into Peter's agenda of what the Messiah should say and do; Peter tried to alter God's plans. Peter didn't like this new information, because he did not want Jesus to go to the cross. He wanted Jesus to be triumphant, a "winner," victorious. He doesn't want Jesus to go to the cross and be "defeated," a "loser" and die.

Peter is a prime example of a person who has faith in Jesus, but wants to fit God into his agenda, instead of the other way around. We can confess that Jesus is Lord with our words, but in our hearts, we want to tell Jesus what to do. We have

faith in God, but we want God to intervene in our lives according to our agenda. For instance, wouldn't it be nice if God wanted me to follow God in a way that *I* would find challenging and outside my comfort zone? And wouldn't it be nice if God could schedule that ahead of time, so I can put it on my calendar? I don't know about you, but I depend on my calendar for my daily agenda - where to be, when to arrive, and what I am supposed to do. Most days it's pretty full.

Do we ever say, "God, I believe in you, but I don't have time for you today, can we reschedule for tomorrow?" Or perhaps we frequently lay out our agendas before consulting with God. It may sound something like this. "God, please heal this person and give this other person wisdom. Lord, please bless me and all of my family. And please strike down my enemies or anything that would threaten to take my life. It would be nice Lord if you could do that, without me having to give much effort on my part. After all God, you know me and we're tight."

We lay out our agenda to God as if God should listen to us. We lay out our agenda as if we know better than God what we need. Don't misunderstand what I am meaning – God does want us to bring our requests to God. But there is a difference between surrendering our cares and concerns to God, and telling God what God should do. That's what Peter tried to do with Jesus. And the reply? "Get behind me, Satan!"

There are times when we put our agenda before God. Then there are times when God will put God's agenda before us. God might tell us, "Take up your cross and follow me and do it like this... Teach Sunday School. Help your co-worker through a crisis. Bring the container of your loose change to a soup kitchen or food pantry. Care for your aging parent. Wear a mask to help protect others." God may say, "Live your life as an example so that others may come to know Me." Or a nudging of the Holy Spirit might lead you to tell others about the difference your

faith has made in your life. Through faith, we are able to respond to hearing God's agenda for our lives, and act boldly in the ways God leads us.

In today's Gospel text, Jesus lays out his agenda for each of us. He says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." God's agenda for our lives goes much deeper than simply following God's laws. It is about surrendering our agenda, and picking up God's agenda that leads us to the cross. It means focusing on divine things instead of earthly. It means putting others first, because it's not about us. We live, because he died – and our words and actions should reflect the reality of this resurrected existence in which we have life.

The good news for us today is that while we are called to go to the cross, we are able to do that because Jesus has already been there. We are called to lay aside our own plans, and listen for God's leading in our life. This is not easy, but we don't have to go through it alone. We have the love, faith and support of our fellow believers around us, to walk beside us, and help guide us, as we journey to the cross. We are in this together – to celebrate the good times and weep together in the sorrow. We share a common mission to proclaim Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world. Jesus loved you so much, that he was willing to suffer and die for your sins. Is your faith in him worth dying to self, so that you can live your life for God? Those who are marked with the cross of Christ in baptism have forever been given the identity as "Child of God" – an identity that outshines all the other ways that we are known in this world. This seal cannot be washed away, as it forever claims us as inheritors *and participants* of God's Kingdom. In this identity we are called to follow Christ – to take up our crosses – and put aside our own agendas, so that we can use our words and deeds to boldly proclaim Jesus as the Messiah – the Bread of Life – the Savior of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Made children and heirs of God's promise, we pray for the church, the world, and all in need.

Revealing God, you have made yourself known through bread and wine, water and word. Continue to nurture your church, that it is a place where your presence is experienced and shared. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Creating God, you brought life into being and called it good. Bring new creation to lands devastated by tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, fires, and other disasters. Restore forests and curb overflowing waters. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Protecting God, you desire all people to live in peace and safety. Provide for all who are in danger. Strengthen first responders to help meet to the complex needs of others. Provide care and compassion as they face trauma themselves. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Transforming God, you announce release to the captives and freedom to the oppressed. Break chains of discrimination and injustice. Amplify voices that go unheard and inspire us to advocate for the those who are overlooked. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Forming God, you gather your people together in a variety of ways. Shape our communal life, that in our prayer, praise, and worship, we honor you and encourage one another. Keep our disagreements civil and increase our joy in working together. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Redeeming God, you accompany your people through every stage of life. We give you thanks for the saints who now rest in your embrace. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Receive these prayers, O God, and those in our hearts known only to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**