

Mark 8: 27-38 and 1 Cor. 1: 18-31  
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## A Cross in the Road

It is a given to have a cross visible somewhere in any Christian church. And, with churches on nearly every street corner in some places, particularly here in the South, there must be thousands of crosses displayed in sanctuaries all across this country, never mind those perched upon church steeples, carved into headstones, even dotting interstate highways. Crosses are such common sights that we rarely give them a second glance most days.

A large, painted cross held a central place in our former sanctuary, hanging on the screened wall in front the organ pipes. And it was one of the most surprising survivors of the church fire in 2003. The fact that it survived unscathed was so surprising that, in fact, when a church member walked into the church house with the sanctuary cross, fully intact, I was meeting with a couple of church members. One of those church members, whose name I won't mention...Juli Mosley...was so taken aback that her unfiltered response was not, "Holy Lord" but Holy something else! By the way, that ranks as one of my favorite stories from my days serving here at Second Presbyterian!

The cross' ubiquity makes sense. It is a central symbol of our faith, representing God's self-giving love poured out for the world in the crucifixion of Jesus. And, because of its profundity and what it means to us, the cross has become, in some ways, not only a common sight, but beautiful. Decorative even. Folks wear it on jewelry and on t-shirts. In our churches and sometimes our homes, we may see it in gilded in gold or silver or glowing in stained glass. We drape it with cloth, depending on the season, and sometimes bedazzle it with flowers at Easter because it is so special to us.

If you stop and think about it though, it's odd to see a cross as a thing of beauty. I wonder if on a subconscious level, with all our decorative applications and inclinations, we make it pretty so it is easier to take, like chasing down a swig of medicine with big gulp of sweet tea. For when we pretty it up, we minimize its scandal. It is a cross after all. And like the

noose, or the electric chair, or the needle, it is the method by which Jesus and the others, condemned with him, were executed as criminals by Rome.

And if you recoil a bit at this idea, you are not alone. So does Peter. In the gospel reading for today, Jesus and his disciples arrive at a crossroads in their story together as they enter the villages of Caesarea Philippi. On one level, this cross-shaped place to which Jesus and the disciples arrive gives them a new vantage point to see where they have been. Those of us unfamiliar with the geography of the region may not grasp the significance of the location of Caesarea Philippi, but it is located in the foothills of Mount Hermon—now known as the Golan Heights.

From the elevated place where they stand, Jesus and his disciples can look to the south and see all of Galilee as it stretches out before them. In a sense, they are able to look back upon their Galilean ministry together, reflecting on what they have experienced so far on the journey. As they look over the rolling hills toward Galilee, they remember the healings, the meals, the miracles, the teaching, the friendship, with some assurance that they all have a pretty good handle on Jesus and what following him means.

Interrupting their reminiscing, Jesus then asks them, “Who do people say that I am?” “Some say you are John the Baptist, Jesus. Some say Elijah or another one of the prophets.” Jesus continues, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter...of course, Peter...proclaims, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

But no sooner has Peter made his proclamation, than Jesus, sternly orders them to tell no one. The best news that the whole hurting world can ever receive. and Jesus says, “Don’t tell.” Instead, Jesus begins to teach them that the Son of Man—the Human One—his favorite way to refer to himself—must undergo great suffering, be rejected by religious leaders, and be executed by the State, and then in three days be raised from the dead. The disciples don’t really seem to hear that last bit. Their focus is on the killing part.

So, the good news about Jesus being the long-awaited Messiah—God’s anointed, Redeemer of the world—this news must be kept quiet while his dark talk of persecution, rejection, suffering, and death—this is the news which Jesus wants to advertise. Peter takes Jesus by the arm and pulls him

away from the others, rebukes him, and tells him to stop the crazy talk, after all who wants to follow a Messiah who winds up dead.

The gentle Lamb of God becomes a roaring lion as he shouts, “Get behind me, Satan.” Sa-tan or “adversary” from the Hebrew, is a strong choice of words. Perhaps the term gives away Jesus’ own feeling of familiar dread, the dread he felt as he was tempted in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus finds himself tempted once again, as Peter is, as we are, to believe that God’s Messiah does not have to suffer, that he can ride a valiant steed into Jerusalem, and shut down all his enemies if they dare rise to challenge him; that their ministry in Galilee is just a warm up for the fomenting revolution which Jesus will lead in Jerusalem, knocking the powerful from their thrones and restoring the glory of God’s chosen people.

Too many of us Christians today still claim this sort of Jesus. One who trades in the cross to for a Winchester rifle, like the John Wayne hero of the old western, or a two-handed sword like William Wallace from Braveheart. We don’t want a suffering Messiah. We want a Messiah who can wield power without knowing the world’s pain; a Messiah who can ascend to the right hand of God without descending to the depths of hell; a Messiah who can taste God’s sweet glory without first tasting death’s bitter pill. We want a Messiah who can walk right past Golgotha unscathed, walk right past the pain of our suffering sisters and brothers, of creation itself, unscathed, rather than a Messiah who, with tears in his eyes, joins us in our pain and picks up the cross himself.

Paul reminds us of just how outlandish our faith in a crucified Messiah is. Paul speaks of the cross as a symbol of utter defeat. And from a PR perspective alone, it would be foolishness to build a faith based upon it.

Earlier in his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul shares his concerns that there are factions developing within the congregation, quarrelling with each other, and Paul reminds the community that whatever claims each faction boasts, whichever church leader to whom they pledge allegiance, regardless of the wisdom, eloquence, authority, or standing of those who lead or espouse any particular position, it all amounts to foolishness in light of the cross.

As the translation in The Message puts it, “Take a good look friends, at who you were when you got called to this life. I don’t see many of the “brightest

and best” among you, not many influential, not many from high society families. Isn’t it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks, exploits, and abuses, chose the “nobodies” to expose the hollow pretensions of the “somebodies.” And only nobodies end up on crosses...or so says the wisdom of the world.”

Paul knows in hindsight what the disciples are learning in real time. Now as they stand with Jesus at that cross in the road, they not only see Galilee, but their eyes focus further toward the horizon at Jerusalem looming in the distance while Jesus continues, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.

Jesus tells them flat out, the kind of Messiah that he is: one who not only gives everything to us but who asks us to give our very selves to follow him. But his call to deny oneself should not be misunderstood. He is not asking us to develop a martyr complex. We know what that is, right? A self-sacrificing behavior present in a range of mental health challenges like co-dependency, depression, burnout, and can be as aspect of abusive or narcissistic relationships. This is about our egos too.

This is not what Jesus means when he refers to dying to the self. For Jesus, dying to the old self, the ego-centered self, allows us to live even more into our true self, made in the image of God, the authentic “self” God created us to be. Dying to that self is meant to free us, to release us and not to diminish or destroy us. To die to this old self is to die to the self that leads a life motivated by fear and not by love, that operates out of a sense of human scarcity and not of God’s abundance, that grasps at a safe and secure life in the world with all its trappings rather than living a fully as we can in every moment, trusting that God is with us and for us, even when it is hard to do so.

And it is hard...but it is the only way to the true life, the authentic life that God intends for each of us. That is what incarnation is all about, Jesus joining us in our humanness—with the fear, the brokenness, the mortality--so that we can look to him and choose not to live out of our fear anymore. Fear becomes optional. Jesus asks that we follow him and his way of love, that we trust him, even when all seems lost, that we loosen our grip on this life of ours, a life that belongs to God anyway, that we lay our old fearful selves down in order to receive a new self, a free self—free to love, free to hope, free to die, the only way to truly live.


And so, Jesus asks the question. But this time, it's not, "Who do you say that I am?" Instead, the question he asks us is, "Who do you say that you are?"

Who are we?" Who are we as we stand at the cross in the road with Jesus and the disciples? Who are we as we dare to follow a crucified Messiah into a hurting world? Who are we as we struggle with feelings of loss and confusion, longing for the way things used to be, of times gone by? Who are we as the poor among us, the immigrant, the stranger, the other are scapegoated and blamed for our society's woes? Who are we as violence continues to be our first response when we feel threatened and afraid? Who are we living in the midst of climate change, globalization, and upheaval occurring around the world? Jesus asks us, "Who are we?" and are we ready for what our answer may mean?

In his book, The Silver Chair, C.S. Lewis expresses our attraction and our dread of this life of discipleship as he narrates the following dialogue between the girl, Jill, and Aslan, the lion.

"Are you not thirsty?" said the Lion. "I'm dying of thirst," said Jill. "Then drink," said the Lion. "May I, could I, would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill. The Lion answered this only by a look and very low growl. And, as Jill gazed at the motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked a mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. "Will you promise not to do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill. "I make no promise," said the Lion. Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. "Do you eat girls?" she asked. "I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it. "I dare not come and drink," said Jill. "Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion. "Oh dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then." "There is no other stream," said the Lion (Hooper, 1).

Sisters and brothers, there is no other stream. There is no other way.



Our world is hurting. The future seems unsure. It is a scary time, but we have faced such times before. And the good news for us is that we have each other, this body, Christ's body, we follow Jesus together, unsure of where we are going or of how we will get there, we can trust that our God is leading us every step of the way, as God always has, and that we will never go anywhere that our God, the God made know to us in Jesus the Christ, has not gone before us and goes with us still. Amen.