

“An Inscrutable Burden”

A Sermon on Mark 8:27-38
Ross Tarpley, Sept. 16, 2018

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 Jesus replied, “Well done, Peter! You’re exactly right! A+ for Peter!” ... oh, wait. Just kidding...*] 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, [Jesus] 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.”

This is the Gospel of Grace.

Thanks be to God.

—(Prayer)—

I’ve said at least once before that I’m perfectly comfortable admitting the writer of Mark’s Gospel account is a much better storyteller than I. As literary units, the Gospels exhibit rhetorical finesse that really shines at the macro level. In fact, in preparation for this sermon I came upon several accounts in modern history where people have done live readings of the gospel from start to finish. Such a performance would not only reflect the oral tradition in which these stories would have originally been transmitted, it would also more accurately capture the literary genius and nuance that we frequently miss by breaking them up into “manageable” pericopes—or self-contained stories. However, I decided that, for the sake of time—and my own continued gainful employment—that I’d condense such a session into a more traditional 20-or-so-minute sermon. (You’re welcome.)

No, but really, work with me here! There is a LOT going on in this short passage! There’s the geographic setting of Caesarea Philippi, a Gentile region that had a temple dedicated to Caesar Augustus; Jesus’ provocative questions regarding his reputation; Peter’s (partially) correct answer and Jesus’ stern commitment to secrecy; Jesus’ first passion prediction followed by the dueling rebukes; intimidating teaching on discipleship; and a seemingly random

apocalyptic statement to wrap it all up neatly with a bow. All of this to say: there are *at least* six different sermons within these twelve verses. And yet still, in light of all this, we must consider how this story is indeed “the Gospel of Grace” today, in this place, as we corporately confessed just a moment ago...

Within Mark’s narrative flow this passage sits right in the middle both numerically (chapter 8 of 16) as well as literarily—a significant pivot point within the story. See, up to this point Jesus has been bouncing around within his native region of Galilee and Gentile territories. Here, however, Jesus begins his journey toward Jerusalem and all that awaits him there, as symbolized by his first passion prediction. From this point on, Jesus anticipates coming “face-to-face with trouble and grief,” shouldering the “distress of the grave,” submitting himself to the “ropes of death,” as our call to worship put it [cf. Psalm 116]. Furthermore, the gravity of Peter’s massive Christological claim cannot be overstated: “You are the Messiah,” that is “the Christ.” This is the first time someone has attributed this title to Jesus beyond the Gospel’s introductory statement in chapter 1, verse 1: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus *Christ*.” Yet, as this passage demonstrates, Peter is both 100% right and 100% wrong. For when Jesus begins his teaching that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering... be killed... and rise again,” the narrator leaves no room for ambiguity—Jesus is not speaking in some parable; rather, “He said all this quite openly” or plainly. But Peter believes Jesus has misspoken. He is the *Christ*, after all! And, though perhaps Mark’s account doesn’t deal kindly with Peter throughout the story, *maybe* a generous reading can give the poor guy a little slack.

While first-century Judaism was not univocal regarding messianic ideology, such a victimized version, as posed by Jesus here, was in no way a prevalent thought. In fact, at least 39 out of 42 intertestamental writings refer to a “messiah” using notable militaristic language, often emphasizing a deep spiritual cleansing within Judaism. Although consensus was rare, there were obvious schools of thought. Thus, Peter’s rebuttal does not represent some outlandish theological hope of his day, nor is it—at its core—some trivial concern he happened to deem worthy of confrontational energy. For Peter and so many others, messianic hope was rooted in self-preservation, systemic liberation from an oppressive imperial regime, and concerned the very character of Yahweh with regard to covenant faithfulness to the people of Israel. But, as Mark’s Gospel repeatedly emphasizes, Jesus is not defined by the term “Messiah”; rather, he radically redefines what “Messiah” means. We see that Jesus’ identity is not correctly affirmed *again* in

the narrative until the unlikeliest of characters—a Roman centurion—declares, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” as Jesus ultimately dies on the cross. This means that Christ’s somber invitation to discipleship here in chapter 8 does not bear the luxury of figurative rhetoric. His words carry the weight of his own impending reality. For Jesus (and *eventually* his disciples), denying yourself, taking up a cross, and losing your life for the sake of the Gospel looks a bit different than a hyper-spiritualized, postmodern, Western form of Christianity often makes it out to be...

Christian traditions that adhere closely to the liturgical Church calendar observed the Feast of the Holy Cross this past Friday. According to the Episcopal church, this day serves as “A major feast observed on September 14th [each year] in honor of Christ’s self-offering on the cross for our salvation. The [liturgy] for Holy Cross Day recalls that Christ ‘was lifted high upon the cross that he might draw the whole world unto himself,’ and prays that ‘we, who glory in the mystery of our redemption, may have grace to take up our cross and follow him’ (BCP, p. 192).” Whereas Good Friday commemorates the passion and crucifixion of Christ, this feast day celebrates the cross itself as the instrument of salvation. The late 19th-century hymn “Lift High the Cross” expresses these themes powerfully:

O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree,
your death has brought us life eternally.
So shall our song of triumph ever be:
praise to the Crucified for victory.
*Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim
till all the world adore his sacred name.*

Yet how far removed do we find ourselves from this, a 2,000-year old symbol of our faith? What was once a medium for the death penalty now adorns our necks, ears, or wrists, fashioned from gold or silver and studded with precious gems; or perhaps it hangs in our air-conditioned homes, covered in tasteful watercolors or feel-good scripture passages. Such irony deserves our attention and perhaps even criticism at times. We don’t equally display other modes of public shaming and death. We don’t carry around bookmarks or set our phone backgrounds with images of a guillotine, a noose, or an electric chair. So why does the Church universal still venerate such savagery? How is it that we celebrate and flaunt an instrument of torture?

Because, by the words and the example of Jesus of Nazareth, the murder of God in Christ on the cross was *only* fitting so that God could be in all and through all. Not that God demanded a blood sacrifice to appease some insatiable Divine wrath. For what kind of *God* is bound by

eternal anger, no matter how “just?” On the contrary, God *so loved the world* that the only begotten Son donned human flesh through the Incarnation not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Because no one has greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends [cf. John 3:16-17, 15:13]. God in Christ had to die not because God said so but because we said so. When perfect Love dared show its face in our midst we took advantage of it, tried to manipulate it to our own messianic ideals, took offense to its subversion of the status quo, rebuked it, denied affiliation with it, and ultimately crucified it. And it was not the weight of our collective sin, or the supposed “total depravity” of human nature that held Christ through his dying breath on the cross; it was the magnitude of Divine Love for all of creation. This is the “scandal” of the cross to which Paul refers in his letter to the church at Corinth: what was meant to scorn birthed grace; what was meant to reject birthed redemption; what was meant to kill birthed resurrection. However, the scandal of the cross did not end with Jesus. No, the “foolishness of God” breaks forth into our world even now, *for the cross of Christ is forever the great, cosmic equalizer*.

In Christ, the haughty and powerful are brought down, and the lowly are lifted up [cf. Luke 1:50-54]. So where our power, wealth, education, class, ethnicity, gender, age, orientation or privilege comfort us, we must bear the humility of Christ lest we disillusion ourselves into being our own gods. Though the cross served as a demonstrative tool of humiliation and torture for the first-century Roman Empire, the Powers of our modern world are not so far removed from this context. From systemic and institutional injustices that cause the economic, emotional, spiritual, and/or physical deaths of countless victims; to the ways in which we deny the *imago Dei* in others and dehumanize them through cyberspace or across political party lines: Our piety, intellect, or supposed moral high ground does not release us from the charge to deny ourselves with Christ on the road to Calvary. The Church has a long history of baptizing violence, hatred, or apathy in the name of God as well as doling out countless crosses for *others* to bear. However, the *distinction* between the cross of Christ and those assigned by humans in positions of power rests in the scope of its beneficiaries. To those who suffer from addiction or mental illness; to those who have been “welcomed” but not “affirmed;” to those who are chronically homeless or impoverished; to those who are turned away or thrown in prisons for fleeing violence in their home countries; to all these and more who simply have “their cross to bear”: who benefits from that cross? Because the cross of *Christ* reconciled humanity to God. Therefore, any cross worthy

of bearing necessarily involves *empathic* suffering—suffering *with or for*—not *prescribed* suffering—suffering *to*, for its own sake.

And yet, like Peter, we live in the paradox of totally missing it but also *getting it*, by the grace of God. Those of us gathered here are not without our own sorrows. And so we, too, trust that where *our* suffering obscures the reality of the Kingdom of God and abundant life through Christ, we can cling to the bleeding hands of Jesus who has promised us peace and resurrection. For through his sacrificial love, God identified most closely with human pain and brokenness. And in this newness of life we are to serve as beacons of hope for a world in desperate need of something to hope in. In our belief and in our unbelief, as father Richard Rohr says, “God wants usable instruments who will carry the mystery, the weight of glory and the burden of sin simultaneously, who can bear the darkness and the light, who can hold the paradox of incarnation—flesh and spirit, human and divine, joy and suffering, at the same time, just as Jesus did.” Then, through the mystery of the cross of Christ—this inscrutable burden—we may find *at-one-ment* with our Lord as we sing with the throngs before us:

*“Finish then Thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation
perfectly restored in Thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before Thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.”*

Amen.

*And so, friends:
May the God who seeks you find you when you fall,
May the God who loves you take delight in your living,
And may the God who sends you, send you out now with joy;
For in your gladness, and in your grieving,
In your brokenness, and in your healing,
In your faithfulness, and in your leaving,
The God who made you,
The God who loves you,
The God who redeems you,
Is the God who keeps you, still.
Amen.*