

Proper 19B
Mark 8:27-38
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood
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Following Jesus

Today's reading is a turning point in Mark's gospel, as Jesus' ministry shifts from Galilee and begins to look towards Jerusalem and the Passion.

But before we start on today's gospel, I want us to look back just 5 verses in this chapter, to a brief story about the healing of a blind man. This healing story is different than others, not only because it doesn't appear in the other Gospels, but because the blind man isn't healed right away. Jesus has to apply his healing touch twice, for with Jesus' first touch, the blind man indicates he can see men, but they look like trees walking. But after Jesus' second touch, the man's eyes are completely restored, and he's able to see everything quite clearly.

Mark has good reason to tell this story before we hear of Peter's announcement of who Jesus is, for it reminds us of our human nature, our ability to see yet not grasp what we have seen; to physically perceive, but not yet symbolically understand.

All the disciples have seen works of wonder, witnessed Jesus' authority to forgive sins, and seen his popularity with the crowds. Peter jumps in quickly to respond to Jesus question about who he is. "You, Lord, are the Messiah.

But how well does Peter actually see? And what does he understand of what he's seen?

Peter could be thinking that Jesus is going to be another King David, a mighty warrior who could lead the Jewish people, bringing freedom from the yoke of Roman rule through power and force. Or perhaps Peter envisions the Messiah as the glorious leader, with himself and all the other disciples at Jesus' right hand, ruling over the newly freed people.

We can't know exactly what Peter's was thinking, but we do know he was caught off guard when Jesus explained that he was to suffer, be rejected, killed, and then rise again. For after this teaching, Peter felt compelled to take Jesus aside and tell him he must be wrong. Suffering and death are not what's supposed to happen to the Messiah! Peter thinks things should play out differently, so he tries to change the situation and impose his own thinking on the divine will.

And Jesus' words strike back hard, "Get Behind me, Satan!" for Jesus' ways are not human ways, but God's.

Like the blind man, Peter needs another touch by Jesus. Peter sees imperfectly. He needs Jesus' intervention, his teachings, to help understand the truth. So too, all the disciples. And the crowds. And us.

For confessing that Jesus is the Messiah is NOT the hard part. It's easy to say that Jesus is our Savior, then keep right on doing exactly what we've been doing, without any thought to what it really means to have Jesus as our Lord.

The hard part is following Jesus. How do we align our will with God's? How do we begin to place God's will first?

Following Christ is being willing to step away from a life that says: "I'm the important one and what I am doing and thinking and wanting, is the right way." Instead, following Jesus is being willing to let go of control, to be willing to relinquish the need take the lead, and instead humbly accepting what it means to follow our Risen Lord. Following is hard. And there are costs.

We don't face the same costs as Christians in other parts of the world, those places where Christians are imprisoned, killed, or dispossessed because of their beliefs, or where people face being disowned by their families because they convert to Christianity. We don't face those kinds of costs for our faith.

But we do face other costs. And if we've never had to count the cost of following Jesus then perhaps it's time to look more closely at our lives, and discover whether we need to open ourselves to being touched again by Jesus, because perhaps we, like Peter, need help in seeing more clearly.

How do we react to those who are different than us? This can become particularly difficult when we are close to anniversaries of significant events in our lives, like 9/11, when we remember the devastating loss and pain that struck so many families and communities. The shock waves have continued to rock us, over the past 14 years. But what about those who are not us, who are different from us? Today, it can be particularly hard to be an American who is recognizably Muslim, or non-Christian. On Tuesday, an elderly Sikh-American man was attacked and beaten in Chicago, while allegedly being called a "terrorist" and "Bin Laden." Young American Muslim women are routinely harassed for wearing their headscarves. Is it any more reasonable to define all those who practice a different religion as terrorists, than to think that all Christians advocate radical condemnation, hate, and discrimination against those who do not act and believe precisely as they do?

Jesus asks us to treat others with love and compassion, to strive against social injustice. There's a cost to following Jesus.

Have you ever had difficulty forgiving someone who has injured you, someone who has deeply hurt you? Or asking someone you have hurt deeply for forgiveness. We pray about forgiveness each time we say the Lord's Prayer. Yet truly forgiving, letting go of our anger, letting go of what we can feel is righteous indignation, can be so very hard. It may require us to give up part of ourselves, give up that something that we've been clinging onto so tightly, that it has become part of who we are, even though it may constantly eat at us, wear us down, and tear us apart. It takes great courage to forgive. It takes great courage to ask for forgiveness.

But forgiveness is what Jesus asks of us. There is a cost to following Jesus.

How you ever wondered how to really help those in need, or have you felt overwhelmed by the thought of how to help others? There's an endless digital barrage reminding us constantly of so many needs locally, nationally, and internationally. The demand can feel so immense, it can be immobilizing. Or perhaps we deeply want to help, but also have concerns that someone's trying to scam us, to fool us, in order to take advantage.

I typically wear a small square cross, signifying I am a member of the Order of the Daughters of the King and the DOK has a motto, that many of us in the sisterhood find helpful in answering these kinds of questions.

I am but one, but I am one.
I cannot do everything, but I can do something.
What I can do, I ought to do.
What I ought to do, by the grace of **God** I will do.
Lord, what will you have me do?"

Following Jesus is about forgetting ourselves by listening to God; about seeking to serve Christ, by seeing Christ in all persons.

Discipleship is hard, but we are not on our own, for Jesus touches us, again and again with his Word, helping us to better see the truth. Jesus nourishes us, again and again through his Sacrament, strengthening us to continue his work in the world. It's not easy to follow, but our Loving Savior does know what we most need, if we are to take up our cross and follow him.

Let us pray.

Loving God, grant us the grace to ask what you would have us do. Touch us with the Spirit of wisdom and truth, help us make wise choices, so that in your ever-present light we may find your straight path. All this we ask, in the name of your precious son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.