

“SAVING LIFE BY LOSING LIFE”

Mark 8:27-38

September 13, 2009

Last week, I began with a quote from Mark Twain that said, “It’s not the things I don’t understand in Scripture that bother me, it’s the things I fully comprehend that disturb me.” And then we looked at James’ teaching about faith and works, and how you can’t really have one without the other. This morning, we’re going to look at another challenging teaching – this one from the 8th chapter of Mark’s gospel. We’re going to focus on the middle section and, in particular, verses 34 and 35.

But let’s start at the very beginning of our lesson, because that’s a very good place to start (can you tell that *The Sound of Music* was on last week?).

In verses 27 and 28, Jesus asks and has answered the question, “Who do the people say that I am?” Jesus’ time on earth was growing short. It was crucial for his disciples to finally recognize him for who he was. They had been with him now for a long period of time. They had observed his ministry – how he performed miracles of healing, how he taught as no one before him had ever taught, how his enemies sought to silence him, how he raised the dead, how he constantly expressed love to those around him. Had it finally broken through to them who he really was?

Jesus begins with a more general question: “Who do people say that I am?” Their reply was an honest one. “Some say you are John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others proclaim you as one of the prophets.” Isn’t it interesting that no matter what Jesus did, the general public could not move beyond their preconceived ideas of who and what the coming Messiah would be? Years of history had burned an image of the coming Messiah into their minds, and they just couldn’t move beyond that image. But let’s give them the benefit of the doubt. They thought they were putting Jesus on the highest level. They had not heard the voice of a prophet for several hundred years. Finally, a prophet of God had graced their midst.

But Jesus was not satisfied with their answer. He wanted to get more specific. And so he looks them in the eye and asked the key question, “But who do *you* say that I am?” This is a question we would be wise to consider in our own minds. You might be sitting on an airplane in the middle of a long flight, reading your daily devotions. The stranger sitting next to you might just happen to glance your way and see the name ‘Jesus’ in the literature in front of you, and not having had any previous experience with the Christian faith ask, “Who is this Jesus I keep hearing about?”

Or maybe you’re visiting with a dear friend one day, telling that person about the huge obstacle you’ve just overcome in your life. You tell that person that you wouldn’t have been able to claim victory on your own – that your faith in Jesus Christ and support through the church is what got you through the difficult time. Surprisingly, this person asks, “What difference does going to church make?” and then says, “Tell me more about this Jesus.” What would you say?

For Jesus, it was crucial that his disciples recognize him for who he really was. Whenever I read about this exchange between Jesus and his disciples, I think about my own children coming home from school. We'd often ask them that familiar question, "What did you learn today?" And we'd often get that familiar answer, "Nuthin'." When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" I imagine more than an awkward moment of silence. I picture the faces of the disciples turning quickly towards the ground. Teachers, you know the last thing your students want to do when they don't know the answer is make eye contact with you. I picture the same thing happening here. The disciples staring at the ground, shuffling their feet nervously, thinking to themselves, "I hope he doesn't pick me."

But then the silence is broken by the one Jesus would refer to as 'the rock.' Peter looks up, and as he does, his confidence grows. Everything he has seen, everything he has heard comes together, and with boldness and confidence Peter replies, "You are the Messiah!" While this story is told in three of the gospels, only in Matthew do we find Jesus affirming Peter's response. There Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

It's almost as if Jesus is saying, "Wow! Peter, you did it!" Before the resurrection, before the post-crucifixion appearances, before the ascension, Peter recognized Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. He finally understood what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the way the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me." The Spirit of God had moved upon Peter and revealed the Anointed One to him. Certainly this would make the Top 10 of highlights of early Christianity.

But then Jesus does something that appears a bit strange. Just when the disciples have it figured out, just when they finally had the right words to shout from the mountaintops and proclaim from the hills, Jesus "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." Why would he do that? The next sentence gives us the answer: "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."

It's as if Jesus was saying, "You have answered correctly, but you still have much to learn. Yes, I am the Messiah, but do you remember Isaiah's prophecy? I will be that Suffering Servant, and my suffering will lead all the way to a cross." It's not what the disciples expected to hear...but it is what they *needed* to hear.

Peter doesn't take too kindly to hearing these words. After his revelation and affirmation, this new information is too much. Scripture tells us that he took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. That word – rebuke – is a strong one. It means to reprimand, but almost every dictionary I looked at described it as a sharp or severe or stern reprimand.

So now we have the same person who just answered Jesus' million-dollar question ranting against him. It's one thing to reveal that you are the Son of God/Son of Man, Promised One, Savior, and Messiah...it's quite another to tell me that you're going to have to suffer and die. It was just too much for Peter. He had to speak out.

Jesus answered Peter's rebuke with one of his own. He turned back to the disciples so it wasn't just Peter that he was talking to, but all of them. He said, "Get behind me, Satan!" as if to remind him who was leading this charge. But then he said (and I believe he was speaking to all of the disciples ... and all of us, as well), "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

How often do we do that? We hear a difficult or challenging teaching of Jesus, and because it seems easier or more comfortable to turn it back to something we're a bit more familiar with – something more along the human lines. We don't know enough about, or we're too far removed from the spiritual or the divine, and so we revert back to our own thoughts and our own desires. Peter didn't want Jesus to die, even though Jesus knew that it would mean saving the world.

Jesus tries to help Peter and the other disciples understand. And so he explains to them the cost of discipleship. In these next two verses, we get to the challenging and sometimes confusing teaching. First Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Here we find the complete honesty of Jesus. He's not inviting people to follow him by telling them that it's going to be a walk through the park. He's telling them that if they want to follow, they need to be ready to be regarded as a criminal and even die. But there's another piece to this – Jesus never called on others to do or face anything which he was not prepared to do or face himself. These are characteristics of a true leader.

But then Jesus says, "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." Jesus was reinforcing the point he made earlier, about having to suffer and die. If his life was going to be preserved for all of eternity, if his name was going to be proclaimed as the Savior and Messiah of the world, then he would need to first give his life away. He would need to be offered up as a sacrifice *so that* he and others could live forever.

If that's a difficult concept to grasp, think of it this way. Any talent that we can possess – whether it is in academics or athletics or the arts – will only develop as it is used. If we practice and share our talents through performance, they will grow into something greater. If we refuse to use them, we will eventually lose them.

God gives us life to spend and not to keep. If we live carefully, always thinking first of our own profit, our own ease, our own comfort and security, if our sole aim is to make life as long and as trouble-free as possible, if we make no effort except for the effort we put forth for ourselves, we are losing life all the time. But if we spend life for others, if

we put aside health and time and wealth and comfort in our desire to do something for God and God's people, we are winning life.

What would have happened to the world if doctors and scientists and inventors had not been prepared to take risks? What would have happened to life if everyone had wished for nothing but to remain comfortably at home, and there had been no such people as explorers or pioneers? What would happen if every mother refused to take the risk of child birth? What would have happened if Jesus decided that the risk of suffering at the hands of his accusers and death on the cross was too great a risk?

The very essence of life is in risking and spending it, not in saving and hoarding it. Yes, taking risks and spending life is the way of weariness and exhaustion, but it is better to burn out than to rust out, for that is the way to happiness and the way to God. AMEN.