

March 1, 2015

*“Cross Purposes”*

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Second Sunday in Lent

Romans 4:13-25 ~ Mark 8:31-38

I remember once taking our then teenage son to the mall to buy himself something with some money he had been given at Christmas. I was flabbergasted when he bought a knitted cap. Now remember, this was in Texas and we were suffering through one of those chilly 70 degree January days. But to be fair, I don't really think that the purpose of this cap was to keep you warm ... no, I think the purpose was to make you look stupid. It was more of a skull cap. I called it his "hip-hop" hat, and teased him about it, all in good fun. He just rolled his eyes, as teenagers do. You know, the eye roll that says, "Man, are you old! Man, are you out of touch! Man, you just don't get it

Well, he was right. I'm old. I'm out of touch. I just don't get it. The radical, counter cultural rock that I loved as a teenager is now played on the golden oldies station or worse, in the elevator. I feel like a dinosaur sometimes. I just don't get where our culture is headed these days. Our most popular celebrities sound as shallow as a wading pool ... our most popular entertainment has the emotional maturity of a pacifier, and you would think the biggest fear in our society is the fear of not dressing well. We seem to be addicted to sex and violence. People keep throwing their lives after goals that Ann Lamott calls holograms, "like the eagle on the credit card. It looks good, but in the end, it won't fly." Nope, I just don't get it.

I know I'm old. I know I'm out of touch. But it seems to me that our priorities are messed up. Sometimes, the deepest values of what I understand to be the Christian faith are at clear cross-purposes with the central priorities of our mainstream culture. But I see those being mixed together all over the place, too, and it seems to me it's usually the Christian values that get lost in the translation. Maybe I don't really understand what Christ was about. Or maybe they don't. But I think we should all be a little more careful about taking the name of God in vain. Because when we attach God's name to our political positions, we miss the crucial point that we're not God.

Simon Peter learned that the hard way, didn't he? Many scholars think that our passage today is the main point that Mark was trying to make in writing his whole gospel. Mark wrote at a very frightening and disruptive moment in history. It had been coming for years because the Jews and this new Jewish sect called "Christians" refused to worship the local gods ... which was considered their patriotic duty ... and they refused to worship the Roman emperor ... which was downright foolhardy. Some of the Jews thought that God would help them defeat the Romans, so they started a rebellion. Consequently, the Roman army marched through Galilee and Judea putting down the rebellion as violently as they knew how because it threatened their empire. Jews and Christians were being persecuted in Palestine and in Rome ... imprisoned for no good cause ... their property confiscated ... many executed as rebels. And that created no little

spiritual confusion. This misery wasn't what anybody had expected the Messiah to bring. I mean, most people choose a religion that will get the gods on their side to prevent them from suffering and help them win all their battles. If Jesus was the Messiah, how could he let Christians suffer and Rome win? Mark wants to explain that this suffering ... this oppression which comes from refusing to worship what the culture around us worships ... is exactly what the Messiah brings ... because the Messiah brings real and lasting life to us.

What's going on in this passage? What's going on with Jesus? In the passage that immediately precedes this one, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Why is he asking this? If you need to imagine Jesus as a kind of totally wise all-knowing, all-controlling superhero, with no real human emotion, you might think he is just setting up the disciples here for the answer he wants them to discover. But I see this as a very human exchange. Jesus wants to know if he's fulfilling his calling. Jesus wants to know if anybody's really listening. Jesus wants to know if anybody gets it. And maybe Jesus wants to be sure that he gets it, because up to this point in Mark, nobody understands what he is about except the demons he expels from the possessed.

"You're another John the Baptist," they tell him. "You're another Elijah. You're another great prophet sent from God. That's what people are saying." They don't get it. "But who do you say I am?" Jesus asks them. Why does he ask? Hasn't he been telling them? Is he wondering about it himself? There are times when we need other people to tell us who we are ... to test our assumptions ... to help us overcome our denial and blindness ... to share their perceptions and ideas and experiences of who we are to them. Ironically, we also have to be strong enough *not* to let others tell us who we are ... *not* to live by their expectations and demands ... instead of following our own heart. Or perhaps Jesus is asking this for *their* sake ... because no matter what the world says about who Jesus is, what matters for *your* salvation is who Jesus is for *you*.

"Who do you say I am?" Peter just blurts it out: "You are the Messiah!" No one has said it out loud before. No one has hit the nail on the head. But hooray! Peter gets it! Or at least so it seems.

Immediately Jesus tells the disciples not to repeat this to anyone. That's surprising. It's not the wide-reaching evangelistic manifesto you might expect at this point. It's not Matthew's "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations." Why doesn't Jesus want anyone to know? Why wouldn't he want everyone to know? I wonder if it's because messiah is just a word. It means so many different things to different people ... then and now, and still, today ... when we say "Messiah" we mostly mean somebody who will get us what we want.

There are a lot of things we want Jesus to do for us. Make us successful. Make us popular. Make us rich. Make us happy. Preserve our health. Protect our families. Fix the economy. Build up our church. Solve all our problems. Make winter warmer and shorter. The point is, we want the Messiah to protect us from suffering. But, you know, he never promised to do a single one of those things.

Calling Jesus "Messiah" doesn't mean much unless you understand what *he* means by the word. Naming him your "Savior" doesn't make any difference if you don't understand that he means to save you from some things that you love way too much ... things that may just kill your soul. Following Jesus doesn't mean the path of least resistance ... through the maze of competing truth

claims and multiple idolatries in the world ... that he will bless just anything that feels right to you at the moment. Jesus reserves the exclusive right to tell us what he means in being our "Messiah."

Therefore, Jesus begins immediately to tell the twelve what the word "Messiah" is going to mean for him. *"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."* Peter isn't having any of it. That's not what he meant when he said that Jesus is "Messiah." He meant that he could heal everybody. He meant that he could feed and lead an army. He meant that he could overthrow the power of Rome and make Israel the greatest of all nations like it was (or at least like they remembered it was) back in King David's good old days. Peter meant many things when he called Jesus "Messiah," but he most definitely did not mean suffering, rejection, and execution. He did not mean a cross. Who would follow such a Savior?

So Peter doesn't get it. He just doesn't get it. And Jesus gets angry! *"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* Is he angry because Peter still doesn't get it after all this time? Or is he angry because he doesn't like it either ... and it wouldn't take much for him to abandon that plan? The last time Jesus encountered Satan in this gospel was when Satan tested Jesus in the wilderness. Maybe the biggest temptation Satan can throw at us is the temptation to abandon our destiny ... to be other than who we are and who God is calling us to be. Perhaps Jesus perceives Peter's objection as his own temptation to abandon the Messiah project altogether.

Now Jesus does go all evangelistic on us. Now he widens the call. Mark says, *"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.'"* Not only will he suffer, be rejected, and executed, but he insists those who follow him can expect the same! Well, I don't want to preach that! Jesus says a lot of things I don't want to preach. *"Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you. If they ask for your coat give them your cloak, too. Those who live by the sword died by the sword."* Is he serious about these things? *"Take up your cross and follow me?"* I mean, what kind of invitation is that? Does he expect us to draw large crowds and build a church with that? What congregation is going to grow by calling people to come and lay down their lives ... give up everything ... and follow Jesus even if the whole world is against you?

He goes on: *"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?"* I'm not sure I get that. Do you get that? The only way to win is to lose? He seems to be saying that you have to be willing to lose something, even to die, if you are going to follow him. He seems to be saying that your salvation lies in letting go of some things that seem like life to you but only end in death. Is that what you want from a Savior? These are hard words, but they are his words!

Following Jesus does not mean that he will protect you from all suffering. In fact, following him means suffering of a particular and redemptive kind. He teaches us to love, but that love means that we will suffer for those we love and will sacrifice ourselves for their good. Suffering is also a necessary part of growth and character formation. As Leon Bloy suggests, *"We have places in our hearts which do not yet exist and into them we enter suffering in order that they may have existence."* Not all suffering is redemptive or necessary, of course. But to avoid suffering

altogether is to live a loveless and unreal existence ... to postpone all your suffering to the very end when you can no longer avoid what is real.

Not only that, but following Jesus will put you at cross-purposes with the principalities and powers ... with the idolatries of this world ... with the popular culture and its values ... whatever culture you choose. For almost two centuries liberal Protestant theology worked hard in this country to make Christianity socially acceptable and non-threatening ... a kind of enlightened worldliness that was more mainstream. As Mark Coppenger suggests, the typical sermon was, "History says it this way, Medicine says it this way, Psychology says it this way. Perhaps Jesus said it best." As if, given enough time, all reasonable people, all scientific research, all academic thought would arrive at the deepest values that Christ taught us.

This approach was not new. It began when Constantine baptized the Roman army and made Christianity the official faith of the Roman Empire. But Liberal Christianity appears to be dying. The voice that we seem to hear today is a Fundamentalism which is ironically Constantinian in letting the culture subvert Christianity in their attempt to make the state Christian. What remains of much of liberal Protestant theology recognizes and embraces its distinctive identity apart from the mainstream. Some have begun to take on the identity of "resident aliens," as Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon defined in the book by the same name. Would that it were so simple, but as Paul Tillich said, "We live in two worlds." We try to have it both ways, but we end up like Simon Peter, speaking the truth one moment, and Satan's lie the next.

Well, that is part of the suffering we must endure if we are to follow Christ into the life that lasts. He confronts all our idolatries and finally leaves us with what is real. I don't want to preach this invitation. It's too hard. Listen, if you're looking for a god who will give you whatever you want, go somewhere else besides Jesus. If you're looking for a God who will let you do whatever you want, go somewhere else besides Jesus. But if you're looking for a God who will save you from everything you need saving from, including most especially yourself, and bring you to the life that is real and that lasts, then you've come to the right place! Here is his invitation: "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" Do you get it? Do you get it?

May we pray?

Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior, have mercy on us. Show us our idolatries that we might end them. And help us to follow your way, not ours, for you alone have the words that lead to life. Amen.