

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
September 16, 2018 Proper 19B
Text: Mark 8: 27-38
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: A Landscape of Nurture.

If you are going to follow Jesus, inevitably the question of identity must arise. Who do you say that I am? Jesus is a Spirit Person and a Wisdom figure who heals, teaches, proclaims the coming kingdom of God, calls religious elites back to the center, and runs demons out of God's property, the human soul. If we were around anyone doing these things, we too would be asking who is this? The disciples had already been talking about it and so Jesus in a playful but serious move, turns the tables on them and asks them to answer the question.

As one commentator said, "Everybody is right but not right enough." (Shea) I love that explanation. Everybody gets some of who Jesus is but no one really has it right. He's certainly in the prophetic tradition of calling people back to God and highlighting injustice but he is also a lover of souls and mystic who seems to know God so intimately that you want to learn from him.

Peter takes the conversation deeper with his bold proclamation. "You are the Messiah!" I love people who make you think, who ask the difficult question, who dare to put it out there so that we all grow. I love Peter, impetuous, passionate, all-in Peter. Peter is right, or at least he has the right word, he's fishing in the right water.

Messiah is a big word, freighted with meaning for the Jews. Peter blurts it out but it must be conditioned, shaped, refined a bit.

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 this quite openly. Mark 8:30

Messiah has a core meaning "Son of Man," or "Daughter of Man." It means one who lives in solidarity with God and others. The Messiah is meant to be the first fruits of a new humanity. Jesus exemplifies this new humanity and all who follow him are part of this new way of being we are all meant to be a "Sons and Daughters of Man." The new humanity is a challenging one and is not easily accepted by the religious folks, it doesn't match up to their values and so it must be made to suffer and be eliminated. Jesus, "The Son of Man," is pushed out of this world because in his very person he opened up a new way to be Sons and Daughters of Humanity and that was too threatening for those with power. But while they did succeed in killing the "Son of Man," it was not enough because the power of God, or as Mark puts it, three days, brought that new humanity back into life and into play in the world anew.

Jesus' confrontation with Peter points out something important. The concept of "Messiah," has many meanings. Most of them have to do with glory and conquering or triumph over the oppressors. It usually means honor and status for the Messiah and their followers. So, Jesus' description of the Messiah runs up against Peter's notion of the Messiah he is longing for and has been waiting for all his life. No one's conception of the Messiah included the things Jesus had just included: rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus describes a new messianic way. He tells Peter that this is how the Messiah will be known and this is how things will unfold. It is the straight truth, no sugar coating and without spin. He said it openly and without apology.

Of course, this description of the Messiah by Jesus leads to one of the most famous moments in the Gospels when Peter rebukes Jesus, reversing the role of disciple and teacher. Yet, one good rebuke deserves another, and Jesus turns his energy and focus onto Peter and the disciples. He wants Peter to get behind him again, to begin following and learning again instead of joining the ranks of the enemy. Peter knows the right words but not the right actions. It is not enough to have the vocabulary of grace one must have the understanding as well. Peter is focused on human things, being right, showing those snooty religious elites up, make the powers bow down, doing some damage to those who exploit the poor, but Jesus wants him to focus on the things of God.

We can sympathize with Peter easily. We too find ourselves focused on human things instead of the things of God. It is part of our human condition. If Peter and the disciples have difficulty figuring out the way of God, so do we. What are the things of God: Faith, Courage, losing one's life for the Gospel, being least and being servant of all and doing good. The things of Humans are a little more familiar to us: lack of faith, fear, saving one's life, being great, lording it over people, and doing harm. I wonder if we had to honestly assess where our minds dwell we might find that we are shoulder to shoulder with Peter much of the time.

This Gospel lesson concerns the shape of discipleship, of following Jesus. Jesus wants to make it clear that his path is different than the path we are all shown and disciple into by the world around us. Following Jesus is not about the constant drive to enhance our life and enrich ourselves on the world's terms, which Jesus describes as an "adulterous and sinful generation." Jesus is not interested in our upward mobility, our striving after status or position in the world. His teaching is that if that is what you are seeking then you will lose track of what is truly important. It reminds me of the famous line from *The Little Prince*, "What is essential is invisible to the eye." By Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

The larger life that Jesus wants for us is lost to our sight when we place our attention on human things. We are made in such a way that when we focus on enlarging ourselves we are unable to see the vastness of the kingdom of God around us. In trying to become larger we actually diminish ourselves.

This past week I went to the dollar theatre to see the film *Won't You Be My Neighbor*. I didn't know what I was getting into, but I thought that I had grown up watching Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, so it would be a pleasant stroll down memory lane. I couldn't have been more mistaken. It was a powerful documentary about a person who may have lived more like Jesus wanted than almost any other person I've known about. It was an immersion in the radically different consciousness of a Christian man who wanted children to be loved and accepted for who they were and encouraged to be who they were made to be. I was amazed and pierced to the heart by this film. I found myself (much to my teenagers' chagrin), crying over and over again in the darkened theatre at this amazingly humble and loving man who constantly saw something good in every person.

The film is actually all historic footage and interviews of those who knew him and worked with him and loved him. There is a particularly poignant scene in the film in which Mr. Fred Rogers testifies before the Senate Commerce Committee on May 1, 1969, that was exploring the plan to eliminate \$20 million of funding for Public Broadcasting. The Chair of the committee was Senator Pastore, a known tough customer. Countless people had testified about the importance of the programming to the committee but the chair was unmoved and it looked almost sure that the funding would be done away with. Near the end of the hearings Mr. Rogers was invited to speak. Many people had been reading long statements and making arguments and the chair was clearly tired of that. Fred Roger's made a spirit-led decision. He too had written a philosophical statement that was quite long and he said that he had decided not to read it. Instead, he spoke directly to the chair of the committee hearing just like he did children. He didn't give arguments or statistics, he talked about what he wanted to accomplish through television. How he wanted to help children understand that they were loved and accepted, that they were fantastic just the way they were. Fred Rogers wanted television to be part of a landscape of nourishment for the human family. Among the many moving things that he said was this gem, "What I give is an expression of care every day to each individual child to help them realize that he or she is unique." He reminded the chair that sometimes what is essential is invisible to the eye but that it is no less essential just because we cannot see it. There in the middle of a contentious committee hearing was this humble, loving, articulate, kind man quietly and calmly describing the message of the gospel in a way that the chair could understand it and it melted the room, it melted the heart of the chair, it melted the meanness of the atmosphere and Senator Pastore answered Mr. Rogers testimony with a most surprising response. "I think it's wonderful, I think it's wonderful. Mr. Rogers it looks like you just earned the 20 million dollars." Public Broadcasting would have its funding to offer children something of substance and integrity that really mattered to their human development and ability to process and handle feelings. It was a moment of grace as someone who spoke of the things of God instead of the things of humans changed the course of the discussion.

I think it was an example of what it means to have our attention on the larger life of God instead of our own success or enlargement. Following Jesus is not meant to be a

glamorous endeavor. In fact, it will most likely get us ridiculed a bit, made fun of as idealists, shouted down as soft and too optimistic, dismissed as dreamers. However, what is essential is often invisible to the eye. What is truly valuable is to live as much as possible in the larger realm of God's love. When we center ourselves in that love then we will find ourselves following the impulses of that love. It will lead us to becoming servants and toward seeking the well-being of others. Instead of being great we become small. Instead of needing to tell everyone what to do, we grow in service.

This is not the easy or most popular way to be in the world. The powers that be will be made uncomfortable. In all likelihood they will not simply dismiss or ignore it they will try to discourage it, stamp it out and make those who follow this way suffer. That is why it is the way of the cross. This is what it means to allow ourselves to become a cruciform people. We know Jesus walked in this way and we trust that it is the way that leads to life. So, we commit ourselves to this unusual way of the cross, knowing that it leads to a larger life, the life of God's vast love. We love and continue to love and try to love again even when we fail because we know that the only way to change a loveless world is not through power or criticism or violence but by love.

In a commencement speech to the graduates of Dartmouth College Fred Rogers told a story that you may or may not have heard before.

He had the privilege of attending a Special Olympics race and at that race he was watching one of the sprinting races. The nine athletes lined up and the gun went off and everyone began to run toward the finish line. Everything was going well but then a little way into the race one of the boys fell down and began to cry. The other eight racers, all of them, heard him crying and slowed down and then stopped and turned around to look. All of eight of them went back to where the boy was crying on the ground. One of the racers a girl with Downs Syndrome bent down and kissed the boy's knee that was hurt and said, "That will make it feel better." Eventually they helped him up and then, arm in arm, all nine of the athletes walked toward the finish line together. They all finished the race together at the same time. When they crossed the line, the crowd erupted into joyous applause, and there were tears on the faces of many. Something extraordinarily beautiful had taken place in that stadium.

Fred Rogers said this, "Deep down, we know that what matters in life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win too, even if it means slowing down and changing our course now and then."

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I am indebted to John Shea's commentary on this passage as well as to the Movie, *Won't You Be My Neighbor* and to Mr. Fred Rogers commencement address to Dartmouth College in 2002.

Bonus Material

The Roman philosopher Boethius penned these words long ago for us today:

O happy race of mortals,
If your hearts are ruled by love,
as is the universe.