



Sunday's Sermon

Pastor Lara Forbes



Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 12, 2021

James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

Grace and peace to you from God, our creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's interesting to read Jesus' words in Mark's gospel, together with what James says about the power of words, while thinking about the current political climate in the U.S. and the crises that are going on in the world.

Whether it's people arguing about the current mask mandates, or how to best help people experiencing homelessness, or the most recent statement from your least favorite politician - there's plenty of room for debate about what we say, how we say it, and what it really means to follow Jesus.

And it wasn't any clearer in biblical times than it is now.

When Jesus and the disciples had the conversation in today's gospel reading, they were in an area where it was very obvious that Rome was the occupying political power. Worship of the emperor and of the Greek god, Pan, were front-and-center.

And everyone in the area was expected to honor those worship practices. Speaking out against them was the equivalent of speaking out against the Empire itself, and it had major consequences - whether it was said directly, or something like what Jesus said when he asked, "So...who do *you* guys say that I am?"

When Peter answered that Jesus is the Messiah, he was most likely expecting Jesus to go on and tell about how his status would bring about a military-type victory that would get other people excited and want to join in making that happen.

But what Jesus actually said was as life-threatening for his followers as it was for him.

So when Peter took Jesus aside, it was just as much that he didn't want these things to happen to Jesus as it was him saying, "Are you nuts?! That isn't what this is about...!"

And Jesus' rebuke was more like, "Really, Peter?! After everything you've seen and done, and after all you've heard me say, you still don't get it? I'm not kidding! This is *exactly* what it means for me to be the Messiah and for people to follow me."

But even though Peter didn't get it, Jesus didn't give up on him or leave him there to figure it out on his own. Six days later, Jesus took him and James and John up the mountain to be witnesses to his transfiguration.

What Jesus revealed about himself in Peter's confession is the truth about who he is as Messiah, and it isn't necessarily the Messiah we want. Who Jesus is *isn't* a Messiah who provides prosperity or guarantees military victory or makes sure that we're happy all the time. That's the Messiah that Peter and a lot of other people wanted - and still want.

Instead, Jesus is a Messiah who meets us in vulnerability and suffering and loss. He's a Messiah who meets us in the places where things fall apart, when things don't go the way we hoped they would...in the places where we desperately need him to be and where we least expect him to be.

In Peter's confession, Jesus revealed the Messiah we *need*. And *that's* who we follow.

I think most of us have heard the phrase, "Oh, that's just my cross to bear" or "That's just *your* cross to bear." But taking up or bearing one's cross isn't something to be taken lightly, and it's one of the sayings or ideas that gets misused in order to justify suffering and abuse.

But taking up one's cross can mean one of two things. In one instance, the cross is a burden that we didn't ask for, and that we would lay down in a heartbeat and walk away from if we could.

But what Jesus is talking about here is that taking up one's cross and following him leads to a completely new understanding of identity. It's an identity that's based in Jesus and no one else. It's an identity that's based in a Messiah who is willing to sacrifice in order to save us. It's an identity that shapes how we live in response to that Messiah.

That sounds like a lot. And it is. In Mark's gospel, this is the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. So the disciples really do need to come to terms with who he is and who he's calling them to be. Time is of the essence for them. And it is for us, too. Because if we don't do it now, then when will we?

This isn't to say that we need to get it right all the time, that we need to follow Jesus perfectly. It's a matter of remembering who he is, that he's the Messiah we need him to be, and not overthinking it.

¹Taking up the cross and gaining a new understanding of our identity is often as simple as going to wherever Jesus is and listening to another person's story. It's bringing hope and healing through rebuilding a relationship - either one that you had with someone else, or encouraging another person to rebuild a relationship in their life.

Taking up the cross, gaining a new understanding of our identity, is helping someone figure out which pieces to pick up first after their life has fallen apart. It's giving of your resources and energy to people who need what you have to offer. It's treating one another with dignity and respect.

The hard part in all of this is when it's *inconvenient*, when it's a hassle to follow the Messiah we need, and it's easier to go and follow what everyone else is doing. The times when we have to sacrifice our own comfort or certainty or judgments - all those things we hold onto that we *think* make us better disciples...

...but if we're honest, they really don't make us better disciples because they're weighing us down or holding us back. But we tend to hold onto what's comfortable, and that's when it's harder for us to say, "Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, and this is what it means to follow him."

Being a follower of Jesus defines our identity and places it in him as the Messiah we need. It's an identity that orders our lives according to Jesus' priorities and not the world's. And most of the time, following Jesus is part of who we are and we just do it.

1 Rev. Sharon Curry. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/RevGalBlogPals>, accessed 9/11/2021

But there are times when we really have to think about it and make a conscious choice. And sometimes that choice is as simple as giving a handful of change or a bottle of water to someone who is homeless standing at an intersection. But sometimes it means standing up to your friends or family in order to do what's right.

Jesus doesn't always ask, "Who do you say that I am?" when it's easy for us to answer. And he doesn't always say, "If any want to become my followers..." when it's easy for us to drop everything and go.

Jesus is the Messiah who meets us in places of vulnerability and suffering and loss. He's the Messiah who meets us in the places where we desperately need him to be and where we least expect him to be.

Jesus is exactly the Messiah we need him to be, and that's who we follow. Thanks be to God! Amen.