

The Second Sunday in Lent (February 28, 2021) Text: Mark 8:31-38  
***“Set Your Mind”***

Mark Twain once wrote: ***“Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand.”*** Trouble understanding is a fairly commonplace affliction for Jesus’ disciples — both then and now. The Twelve had no monopoly of getting things wrong; most of us, on our best days, think we get it, but we don’t. Jesus was very much concerned that the Twelve “get it” and He shares that concern for us.

I can say that, because I read over the passages that immediately precede the verses that comprise today’s Holy Gospel. The eighth chapter of Mark’s Gospel begins with a miraculous feeding of 4,000 people [*Hold on, Pastor! You mean 5,000 people — “not counting women and children.”*] No, I said and meant 4,000; Mark has two feeding miracles to report; this is the second. You would think that, having witnessed such an event, the disciples would have been slack-jawed for days, maybe even weeks, after. But no, they plod on (more on that anon . . .), get in the boat and head for Dalmanutha.

There is an interruption during which some Pharisees demand of Jesus “a sign” (apparently feeding 4,000 people wasn’t sign enough for them ... clearly they do not understand — do not want to understand!) Now, remember that the Twelve had just handed out people bread enough to feed to 4,000 people. They are in the boat heading across the Sea of Galilee and they get to the other side. Now, I don’t know if Mark intended this to be humorous or not, but I think it is: ***“Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.”*** Enough bread to blanket three city blocks had been flying around that field, and they forgot to bring any along with them.

Then Mark records this exchange: ***“And [Jesus] cautioned them, saying, ‘Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of***

*Herod.* They said to one another, *'It is because we have no bread.'* And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, *'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? . . . Do you not yet understand?'*” Mark does not record their answer, but if he had, I am convinced their reply would have been *“Understand what?”*

Then a blind man is brought before Jesus. This healing miracle is found in Mark alone, and it has qualities to it we find nowhere else in the Gospels. We might deduce that this is Jesus' very first healing miracle, and like many beginners, He doesn't get it fully the first time (but such is not the case). First, Jesus leads the man out of the village, away from the crowds. He then spits on His hands, lays them over the man's eyes, and asks, *“Can you see anything?”* The man says, *“I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”* Not quite fully there. Jesus places His hand on the man's eyes a second time and *“his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.”* Again, I don't know if Mark meant this to contain humor, but isn't it ironic that the disciples can't understand and this blind man sees everything clearly?

Jesus charges the blind man to be quiet about this — keeps him from going back into the village; tells him to just go home. Think about that for a moment . . . Remember the fairy tale about the tailor who was given an important job for the king's clothing and realized that his skills weren't really up to the task? He finally falls asleep in a worried tizzy only to awaken the next day to find that the most perfect garment is before his eyes in his shop, the work of elves who came in during the night. What if we were to walk into church next Sunday to be told that the fellowship hall renovation had been completed . . . all done: electrical, plumbing, painting, doors, ceilings, flooring — all of it perfectly done! Could you keep quiet about that? Not likely. You'd buzz among yourselves, *“How that happen? Who's responsible? What does it mean?”* and, when you got home, you would get to the phone and let others who weren't here know what happened. I would hazard a guess that at least one person

present would utter, *“I don’t understand!”*

So . . . there is now before the Twelve several pieces of evidence for them to consider: 1) The feeding of 5,000 followed by the feeding of 4,000; 2) A blind man restored to sight; and 3) There’s a ton of other evidence from earlier in the Gospel . . . Jesus pops THE question: ***“Who do people say that I am?”*** [it is a variation on the theme, *“Do you understand?”*].

Brian Stoffregen writes: *“The question Peter answers right is, ‘Who is Jesus?’ (8:27-30). . .”* ***“Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah,’”*** Mark tells us. *“Nailed it!”* We, of course, are so familiar with the word and its connection to Jesus, we do not catch how radical it was for those words to have come out of Peter’s mouth. Messianic hope was a big deal in those days. To gain some perspective on what Peter might have thought he was saying, listen to Tracey R. Rich writing in “Judaism 101”: *“The notion of an innocent, divine or semi-divine being who will sacrifice himself to save us from the consequences of our own sins is a purely Christian concept that has no basis in Jewish thought . . . The mashiach will bring about the political and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people by bringing us back to Israel and restoring Jerusalem (Isaiah 11:11-12; Jeremiah 23:8; 30:3; Hosea 3:4-5). He will establish a government in Israel that will be the center of all world government, both for Jews and gentiles (Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:10; 42:1). He will rebuild the Temple and re-establish its worship (Jeremiah 33:18). He will restore the religious court system of Israel and establish Jewish law as the law of the land (Jeremiah 33:15).”*

Imagine, then, Peter’s dismay — utter shock! — that Jesus should begin to talk about death and rejection. The Messiah — mashiach — rejected? Unthinkable!

Brian Stoffregen continues: *“The question Peter answers right is, ‘Who is Jesus?’ (8:27-30). The question Peter can’t quite comprehend is, ‘What must Jesus do?’ (8:31-33) . . .”* Peter “rebukes” Jesus (pretty bold thing to do for one you’ve just dubbed “the Messiah”). So Jesus rebukes him right back — and what a rebuke: ***“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting***

***your mind not on divine things but on human things.***”

What does Peter do to merit such a devastating lambasting? He heard his friend and master talking about dying and suffering; who wouldn't want to put a stop to that kind of negative thinking? Moreover, he just heard the one he confesses as Messiah talk (in his mind) about giving up that status. How is that being “Satan”?

Last Sunday we heard how Jesus was ***“tempted by Satan.”*** Mark provided no details about that temptation, but it is plain from Mark's narrative that Jesus has exactly the mission of “. . . *an innocent, divine . . . being who will sacrifice himself to save us from the consequences of our own sins . . .*” This is not what Peter would have expected when he called Jesus “Christ.” Jesus cannot allow Peter's misconception get in the way of fulfilling the mission He came to fulfil; and if Peter is going to stand in the way of that mission, He is as obstructive as Satan. Anything — anything! — that inhibits, detains, sidetracks, short-circuits, or in any other way does not fully foster the mission of Christ is Satanic.

***“Your problem,”*** Jesus advises Peter ***“[is that] you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*** Your Messianic expectations are too human — what's the big deal about having a restored Israel that would match the reign of King David? What is that compared to restoration to oneness with God and eternal life with Him?

Again Brian Stoffregen: *“The question Peter answers rightly is, ‘Who is Jesus?’ (8:27-30). The question Peter can't quite comprehend is, ‘What must Jesus do?’ (8:31-33), which also leads to an inability to properly answer, ‘What are we to do?’ (8:34-38).”* Well, if Peter's problem is that his mind is set on human things, the obvious answer is to set his mind on divine things. But what does that mean?

Jesus lays out three things: 1) deny oneself, 2) take up one's cross, and 3) follow Jesus. But before we can begin to comprehend what these mean for us, we need to take a look at Jesus' full reaction to Peter.

Jesus says to Peter, ***“Get behind me, Satan!”*** We've already looked at

the “Satan” part; it’s the **“Get behind me . . .”** we now need to address. We tend to assume that Jesus is telling Peter to get out of His sight, lest he keep on trying to deter Jesus from moving ahead. I’d like to suggest that Jesus is telling Peter to line up: *“I must lead, Peter because you don’t have a clue as to where we’re going. I must lead, because your priorities are all messed up. I must lead and you must follow.”* As one pastor put it, *“Perhaps a motto for Christians should be, ‘We’re number two.’”*

Such is the nature of denying self. This is an act of the will, to walk into each day with the attitude: *“Jesus, I want to go where You want me to go, do what You want me to do, say what You want me to say, love whom you want me to love, and in all things give myself to You.”* Set your mind of the things of Christ, and the things of the self begin to fade. Our sinful natures being what they are, we will not ever, fully deny self; we are too tightly wired to think of self first. But the more we ask the Spirit to position us to look to Jesus to see what Jesus wants from us, the more our minds will be set on things divine.

Such positioning requires of us that we **“take up [our] cross.”** First, note that Jesus does not say “take up the cross;” He will take up the cross. But, as we set our minds to take up our cross, we need to be sure we understand what that means. Lamar Williamson writes: *“The cross Jesus invites his hearers to take up refers not to the burdens life imposes from without but rather to painful, redemptive action voluntarily undertaken for others.”* So it’s not just the pains of life that inevitably come upon all of us — losses, disappointments, regrets — physical, emotional, and relational pain. Taking up our cross is more profound than that.

The cross was an instrument of death. We get that. What we don’t so readily get is the notion of shame and ridicule that accompanied the cross. Jesus was made to carry His cross to Golgotha — this was not exceptional; this was the norm. The idea was that those being led to crucifixion would be paraded through town to suffer the public disgrace of the entire community. In Jesus’ case, it backfired, because the people on the streets were not ridiculing Him; they were weeping over Him. But

the intent of “taking up the cross” was to shame and debase. Jesus seems, then, to be saying, *“be willing to display your faith publicly and suffer the consequences that such a display might evoke.”*

Often, our reluctance to display our faith publicly is the fear of what others might think of, or do to, me. Rather than denying self, we seek to protect it. Father John Powell, in his book, Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am? provided this answer: *“I am afraid to tell you who I am, because, if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it’s all that I have.”* So, rather than risk being hurt, we don’t tell others who “I am.” Trying to protect and save self from pain, we lose self. We become a non-self in our relationship with other people. We play a role — make-believe — rather than be our selves. Taking up the cross means exposing that real self, the one redeemed and sanctified in Christ.

Since Jesus has already borne the cross, any cross-bearing we do will, by definition, be after Him. We will follow Him. But following Jesus means much more than merely the sequencing of time that we come after Him. Indeed, while Jesus bids us “follow” He has Himself blazed the path and now stands with open arms beckoning us into His embrace.

That word “follow” ακολουθεις (akoloutheis) can also be translated as “imitate.” To follow Jesus is to imitate Him more and more; that is, becoming more and more Christ-like. Sounds simple; it is. Easy? No!

One scholar said it well: *“Perhaps even after hearing and believing what Jesus has done and what we are to do; at best we can only confess, ‘It’s as clear as mud.’ We have been touched by Jesus so that we have been cured of our blindness, but we are waiting for the final healing touch so that we might see clearly . . . We see, but we are waiting to see clearly. We believe, but we need help with our unbelief. We follow Jesus, but our attitudes are often still centered on self and human things. The hammer of God [must] again drive us to our knees before the saving grace of Christ.”*

That, my friends, is what Lent is all about.

Amen.