

September 16 – Pentecost +17

Proverbs 1:20-33

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+1:20-33>

James 3:1-12

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+3:1-12>

Mark 8:27-38

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+8:27-38>

If you were to read today's gospel lesson from a bible you'd probably be three subheadings – Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus predicts His death, and the way of the cross. In a sense today's sermon is also divided along these three sections.

So let's start at the very beginning. Jesus and His disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" Now before we get to that essential question, let's set the stage a bit. First, let's note where they are, and we have a couple of pictures on the screen to help us get a sense of what Caesarea Philippi looked like then and what it looks like now. The location adds layers of meaning. Caesarea Philippi is named for two rulers: the Roman Caesar Augustus, and the Herodian Philip. This site is also near the ancient temple of Pan, a place associated with revelation. But this is the backdrop, the Greco-Roman world, its kings and leaders, its gods and religion. And around this place Jesus asks, who do people say that I am? The disciples replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

Just to recap a bit, we're in Mark 8, so think back over the past two months when we spent most of that time looking at Mark 6 and John 6. Mark 6 begins with Jesus going to His hometown, but He can't do any miracles there except heal a few sick people. If we were to ask them who Jesus is, they'd say isn't this the carpenter's son? The son of Mary? But if we read on, we see Jesus feeding the 5000, having compassion on the crowds even when He's exhausted. And as we saw last week, Jesus begins to heal Gentile peoples, a woman whose daughter is possessed, and a man who cannot hear or speak clearly. And in John 6 we had tons of references to Jesus being the bread of life. In Jesus, we have the living bread, all that God has to offer, so that we might encounter God and believe, and enjoy God's presence forever. When Jesus offers His "flesh and blood", He offers everything He has, His heart, mind, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, everything.

But when many of Jesus' disciples hear Him say that they must eat His flesh and drink His blood, they turn away. These ones are left, Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." And today we see another example of Peter's faith. Jesus shifts the question from who do people say that I am, to what about you? Who do you say I am?" And Peter answers, you are the Messiah. Now although Peter had the right term, he doesn't have the right meaning. When Jesus predicts His death, telling His disciples about the suffering He is to endure, Peter takes Him aside and scolds Him.

'Messiah' was a Hebrew word meaning the anointed one, which is a reference to the ancient line of kings in Israel. The prophesied one is who the people have been waiting for for

hundreds and hundreds of years. It was believed the Messiah would restore Israel, both nationally and religiously, like the days of his ancestor King David. So we can see just how much is tied up in this word “Messiah” which is translated as “Christ” in Greek. But this isn’t at all what Jesus means. Yes Jesus is the Messiah, the promised one sent to save Israel, and the whole world, but not the way the people expected. Not by conquering kingdoms and promoting a bigger, grander temple that rivaled others in the empire.

Jesus will redefine the meaning of this title by His suffering and death. In a way it seems like I’m telling you something you already know perhaps, but let’s try to imagine what this all would have sounded like. The Messiah, the one Israel has been waiting so long for, to overthrow their oppressors, and start a new era of prosperity, would be rejected by the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and on top of that he must be killed. This seems like nonsense, it’s a stumbling block, a scandal. You’d totally overlook or fail to hear the part about rising again after three days. How could the Messiah die? It didn’t make sense. You might as well say the sun is going to stop shining in a few years. Peter has faith, but this doesn’t make sense to him. So Jesus ends up rebuking Peter because He doesn’t have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

How quickly we go from confessing Jesus as the Christ and betraying our confession, setting our mind on human things. Peter associated righteousness with power and privilege, and he failed to see the difference between his personal political theology and his personal social situation. He wanted to follow the next King of Israel, not the next fad to be humiliated and rejected. Who can blame him? Who wants to follow a leader like that? Not me. But the story goes on. Remember that when Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus warns them not to tell anyone about Him. In Jesus’ harsh words of rejecting Peter’s claims, I think one way to interpret this is not to say anything (yet) because they will not understand what it fully means to confess Jesus as Messiah until they stand beneath His cross, and come to witness the Resurrection.

I think we spend a fair bit of time looking at Jesus’ resurrection, but less so at His death. Jesus was crucified and how people feel about this, and what they believe about it, is almost as interesting as what they might say if they were asked who do you say Jesus is?

The cross represents suffering and love among other things. In Christ’s death we see God who takes on human flesh and is willing to suffer with us, as one of us. In Christ we meet God’s love for the world, and God’s willingness to enter into creation which God made and called good. And we can spend weeks and weeks unpacking other meanings or perspectives of the cross, but I simply want to say that this is one of the most important things about the Christian faith that makes it distinct from other religions, the cross where we worship a God who suffers and dies.

In the cross, we more fully understand that the call to Christian discipleship is a call to follow Christ *into* the world rather than *away* from the world. God entered into the world to demonstrate God’s love for humanity and creation, to help us get back into a right relationship with God and with each other. Jesus came and sought out the lost, the broken, the marginalized, and came into the world to be with people rather than retreating and being away far off in heaven.

We’re not going to be able to learn all about the symbolism and significance of the cross on one Sunday, we’re not going to fully understand discipleship this week, but perhaps we might

get a clearer sense of how Jesus is unique, and what makes our Christian faith so distinct from others. And let me just say that while some people have pursued other faiths, or walked away from religions, some people do in fact have good reasons to believe what they believe, or not believe at all. Sometimes the greatest barrier to someone's faith isn't their reluctance to accept a suffering God, but their difficulty in recognizing the gospel when so many have suffered at the hands of those claiming to be Christian or acting on behalf of God.

Like Peter, and the disciples who continue after Jesus says they must eat His body and drink His blood, the choice is whether or not we continue following Jesus after He says He must die. The choice is to continue following the Messiah or not, recognizing that following Jesus doesn't lead to prosperity and success but to pain, suffering, and persecution.

And it can be hard to really let these words sink in. We're not in the first century, Mediterranean world. We're not a fledging religion just getting started, we're more like the Romans than the Israelites. We're the ones in power, with our religion as the unofficial state religion, and we don't really suffer the same way others risked their safety and lives to be identified with Jesus. That's not to say we're lesser believers, but it is a chance to recognize that true discipleship is defined not by what one might receive but by what one is willing to give. To deny ourselves and take up our cross isn't just a grandiose way of saying sometimes we have to do unpleasant things in the name of the greater good. To take up our cross means being willing to give up those things that we cherish most because we value even more our relationship with God.

It's an ongoing relationship. One that starts somewhere, and goes on for a lifetime of learning and transformation. The story of the cross and Easter finds its way to us who are still "on the way" considering how we live our faith today. It's not just an insurance policy, a get out of hell free card and direct trip to heaven, it's an opportunity to consider what God's involvement and participation in the world meant then and means now.

Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus predicts His death, and the way of the cross. In a sense the three subheadings I referred to are a simplistic way of the beginning stages of our faith. Who do we say that Jesus is? Some of us declare that Jesus is the Messiah, even if we aren't all that sure what it means and entails. Jesus predicts His death and we start to understand that the following Jesus isn't meant to be equated with riches and success. Then comes the way of the cross...an ongoing journey that leads to more contemplation, reflection, and transformation.

Jesus' death on the cross is much, much more than an explanation of atonement and sacrifice. It's unity with humanity in our suffering. It's forsaking everything to show us how deep God's love is for us. It's grace, and care epitomized. And it's also the choice to put God ahead of ourselves. To forgive and love our enemies. To be considerate of those who are often not considered. Sometimes it's hard for us to live this out. But let me just say to think carefully about your actions and your words. Remember the passage from James about our speech. But as our provincial election comes up, we know there's lots of buzz about who's saying what about the ferry and what not, but let's also ask who's saying what about the gospel. Who is campaigning not just on big topics like health and education, but who is looking out for the poor, the widowed, the orphans of today, where are the marginalized, and the oppressed in political platforms.

I think one way we pick up our cross is to vote for the gospel...vote for the party or candidate who is looking out for the needs of all people or at least the ones who need the most help. It might cost us more, but that's what it means to follow Christ *into* the world rather than *away* from the world. To love God and our neighbour, even though it requires us giving something up. Amen.