

Two Ways

I know you're used to hearing the scripture text first, before you hear me start talking about it. And I promise you, you will get to hear today's reading from the eighth chapter of Mark's Gospel. But first, I invite you to come with me to the place where it all happens.

To the place where Jesus' disciples are exchanging sidelong glances with one another. All this time they've been with their Teacher, they've been wondering about it. Now Peter has come right out and said it. In answer to Jesus' question: *Who do you say that I am?* Peter has made the good confession: *You are the Christ. You are the Messiah.*

And at the very moment they hear Peter with their ears, their eyes fall upon that great military stronghold of empire, the fortress city of Caesarea Philippi. Today we might call it Caesarville. A provincial capital of power, a monument to mighty Caesar, emperor of Rome.

How interesting that it's here in the shadow of Caesarea Philippi where the Messiah's identity is finally revealed! For in

the tradition of Jewish faith, expectations of who the long-awaited Messiah will be and what he will do are clear and specific. The Messiah, it's believed, will be a military warrior who will vanquish all adversaries. Who will run the despised occupying Roman forces right out of the land. Who will rule on the throne of his ancestor David. Who will restore the glory days of Israel.

So imagine—if you can—the shock of the twelve when they hear Jesus foretell a radically different destiny for the Messiah. For himself.

Read Mark 8:31-33.

The word of God for the people of God.

Whoa. I, Peter, know I was out of line talking to Jesus that way, but I only did it because of what he said—that the Messiah will experience great suffering. And be killed. No! That just can't happen to Messiah. I don't want Jesus to suffer. And I'm his disciple—so if he suffers and dies, that means *I* might meet the same fate. That's what I fear the most.

That's what's going on in Peter's mind. And in the minds of the others. Peter's only verbalized what the rest of them are thinking. Can you empathize with Peter? Just a little while ago, after giving the right answer, he was basking in Jesus' approval.

But now Peter has received a stinging rebuke. For no temptation Jesus faces is greater than the temptation to not walk the road he has been sent to walk. So anyone who would try to divert him from that road is identified with the tempter himself. *Peter, you Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*

Not on divine things but on human things. If your mind is firmly fixed on human things and your feet are treading human paths, can you be a true disciple of Jesus? He has more to say to all his listeners today, both those who are already his disciples and those who are just *thinking* about discipleship. Jesus has more to say about what it means to be his disciple.

Read Mark 8:34-38.

The word of God for the people of God.

Remember that gifted writer, Mark Twain? This may well have been one of the passages he was talking about when he lamented: “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I *do* understand.” Today’s reading isn’t hard to understand. It’s just hard. Plain and simple.

Jesus is teaching about two ways. About the way of those who want to save their lives, and the way of those willing to lose

their lives for his sake and the sake of the gospel. Jesus is teaching about God's ways and about human ways.

Jesus knows that you and I are human creatures. And that we live among a people who walk in human ways. One interpreter is “convinced that often the world doesn't take Christians seriously because we are so much like the world.”

Are we? Do we have our own ways of seeing Jesus? Human ways of seeing him? Human ways of attempting to get Jesus to follow *us* down paths that look alluring? Human ways of trying to take Jesus and remake him into exactly who we want him to be? To make him into a Jesus who will solve our problems and bring us gratification? To make him into a Jesus who fits the values of a culture that still does its best to persuade us that *the one who dies with the most toys wins*? To make him into a Jesus who is okay with the complacency of a culture in which some have far more than they need and in which many lack life's basic necessities?

Human ways of relating to the Christ include trying to transform him into a Jesus whose purpose is to give us what we want. Which then becomes—in our minds—what we *need*. And which then becomes what we *deserve*.

A well-known car rental company aired a commercial designed to lure customers with the enticement of a full-size vehicle at a mid-size price. The ad concludes with a powerfully seductive rationale for driving such a car: *Because you deserve it!*

Sounds like it's all about stroking the ego, doesn't it? But human egos are fragile. We live in a society whose people spend lots of time and energy trying to get others to like them. We all want to be liked! Not too long ago, after a celebrated entertainer passed away, it was said that even after she became a world-famous star, she continued to be anxious about whether fans would like her.

Aren't such insecurities part of our human condition? Could that be why we're concerned about what others think of us? Is that why, especially when we're younger, we try to somehow remold ourselves into whoever we suppose we need to be in order to please people and earn their esteem? To the point that one day we wake up without a clue as to who we really are? And so we need to go off and find ourselves?

Today, my brothers and sisters, we hear an invitation to *lose* ourselves. To be lost in wonder, love, and praise of the One we need most to please, the One whose approval matters most. To

lose our preoccupation with self, in deep compassion for those for whom God has a special concern. For the least of these that God stoops down to lift up.

One of these called the church line earlier this month. He said, “I’ve been burned out of my home. I’m disabled. I’m up here at the Fairfield Motel. I don’t have any food. I’m hungry. Can you help me?”

Jesus calls us to care for the hungry. For the homeless. For the oppressed. For the afflicted. For the addicted. For those who can’t find work. Today Jesus calls us to turn from the old ways and to choose another way. Today Jesus calls us to set our minds and our footsteps in God’s way.

Today Jesus sets the bar high. Today Jesus tells us that if we’re going to follow him, we are to deny self. To turn from human ways of self-indulgence and ease, of comfort and security. If we’re going to follow Jesus, we are to take up a cross.

Now we place crosses in our church. And we wear them to let the world know that we’re Christians. The cross is the central symbol of our faith. But for us, the cross just doesn’t carry the horrific significance or evoke the gruesome images it did for the twelve. Even so, if you and I had heard Jesus predict his passion

—as they did—we probably would have reacted the same way. We wouldn't have wanted to hear it. We would have struggled to wrap our minds around it. Because crucifixion was the most agonizing, humiliating means of execution the Romans could possibly conceive, normally reserved for criminals and the enemies of empire. The gospel tells us that Jesus knows what kind of death he will die, one of torture and shame. And he asks us, Jesus asks us, not to be ashamed of him. Not to be ashamed of the One who will die this death.

But to follow this One who has bought us. You and I were bought with a price. An incalculable price. And so we are not our own. We belong to the One who informs us today that being his disciple has a cost.

In some parts of the world, Christian believers are still witnessing with their lives, are still being martyred. In North America, it's not likely that you or I will have to lay down our physical lives for our faith. But like those first-century disciples, twenty-first century disciples live in an age in which we can expect that faithfulness to Jesus will result in ridicule, rejection, and rebuke. If we don't walk in human ways, in the ways of the world, we can expect the world's rebuke. We can expect to suffer.

Suffering does not gladden the heart of God. You and I know that. But the Scriptures tell us that good people do suffer. So why do some Christians believe that if we only pray long enough and frequently enough and earnestly enough, God will take away all suffering?

Maybe it's because human ways encourage us to do whatever we can to avoid suffering and to avoid others who are suffering.

Yet Jesus leads us not *away* from all that, but straight *into* it. Like a first responder who runs, not *away* from a fire or a shooting scene, but *toward* it. That's the direction Jesus is heading in. That's where we'll find him. In the cell block. In the rehab facility. In the memory care unit. In the cancer ward. In the streets with the homeless. And if we follow him, these are the settings where we'll find ourselves. The good news is that we don't go there alone. Jesus the Christ—who is faithful—has promised to be with us always.

Leading you and me. But if I put myself *in front* of Jesus, how can he lead me? Today he commands Peter: *Get behind me!* Jesus puts Peter—and he puts you and me—in our place. Our proper place. Behind him. I can't follow Jesus unless I'm behind

him, keeping my eyes fixed on him. It's all about getting behind Jesus and following him.

He wants you to know that the way of following him is narrow. It's the way of the cross. It's the way that is Jesus himself. It's the way of a God who knows suffering and who suffers with us. It's the way of a God who is turning this upside-down world right-side up. It's the way of a God in whose kingdom the first are last and the last are first. It's the way of a God who first loved us, before we ever knew that we couldn't even hope to deserve such wondrous love. It's the way of a God who loves every person who bears God's image—even with all our human ways. It's the way of a God who loves with a love whose breadth and length and height and depth transcend our understanding. It's the way of a God who claims your life and mine.

Walk in God's way. It's the way that leads to life in God. It's the way that leads to life in God's saving grace. It's the way that leads to life that never ends.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.