

Sermon Text: Mark 8:27-38

Now, I want to warn you that my opening illustration is one that I picked up. It's a sort of a joke, but it does sort of illustrate this Gospel reading. In seminary, this was funny. It was hilarious! In seminary. Your mileage may vary here today.

Jesus said unto them, “Who do you say that I am?” They replied, “You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the ontological foundation of the context of our very selfhood revealed.” Jesus said, “What?” That is how we talk in seminary. Jesus asked, “Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am? Who am I to you?” Millions believe even now that there was a man named Jesus. They also believe, many of them, that Jesus was a trickster, a phony, and a crazy man, perhaps a fool. Millions believe in a factual historical Jesus, but they also believe that he was a loser, a man who preached about and talked about an all-powerful God even as they nailed Him to a cross. Many believe that He was real. They also believe He was not very important.

I heard a funny story last week about a man who thought, he thought, that he was important. If you've traveled by air lately, especially in or out of the country, you know how long it takes to go through security. Now, personally, I do not mind. I do not mind how long it takes for security to check all those other people, who are getting on my airplane. I don't mind at all. Some people do mind. I read this last week about a man who was growing increasingly impatient in a slow moving line, and suddenly, he pushed his way to the front of the line, and he was waving his first class ticket, and he demanded to be boarded right that second. The agent said, “I'm sorry, but I have to take care of all these other people first, these people ahead of you.” The irate man started pounding his fist on the counter, pounding his fist, and said, “Do you have any idea who I am? Do you have any idea who I am?” The agent was completely cool and unperturbed. As I said this morning, when I heard this story I sort of imagined Joe Chandler being the one, the agent, to pick up the microphone and say, “Attention, please. There is a gentleman at the boarding gate who does not know who he is. If there is anyone in the airport who can identify him, please report immediately.” It's funnier if you do it with Joe Chandler's voice. It is. The man went to the back of the line very, very quietly.

Now, when we say Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior, One with God as Father in Son and Spirit, do we know what we are saying? Do we know who we are saying Jesus is? Can we then, if we know this, walk to the back of the line quietly and keep that a secret? I don't think so, but we are afraid. We are afraid of small things mostly, small things, like a little bit of a social stigma if we're too forward with our faith or lectures from people ever so much more sophisticated than we. Or we're afraid of being branded as some sort of a fanatic or a religious zealot so we say, yes, we'll say, we'll say it here that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, that He is one with Father and Holy Spirit, but then we tend to walk quietly into the background as if we didn't really know. As if we know the words only, but not the depth and the power that flow from this exclusive proclamation.

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Have you noticed that exclusive claims have fallen into sort of disrepute? Any sort of exclusive claim has sort of fallen out of fashion these days. Right, wrong, who's to say! Religions, well, after all, aren't Jesus, Vishnu, Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius and L. Ron Hubbard all different paths to the same God? Well, no! One of the claims that Scripture and tradition in the Christian church of all ages has made concerns the exclusivity of who Jesus is. Jesus is more than teacher. Jesus is more than mere man. Put another way, even though there is much to admire in other beliefs, no bridge reaches God except one. Let me let Scripture speak. 1 Timothy 2:5, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 3:18, “For Christ died for sins once for all the righteous, for the unrighteous to bring you to God.” From the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and that Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten Son of the Father.” They asked with stones in their hands, later in the Gospel of John, they asked with stones in their hands, “Are you a man making yourself equal to God?” Jesus said, “The Father and I are one.”

From the human side, it was in large part these exclusive claims that got Him nailed to the cross, but from God's side, it was love and atonement for our sin that kept Him there. For the first time in generations, there actually is more to fear than just social stigma from professing Jesus a little too boldly and a little too publicly. In 1999, at Columbine High School, those killers asked a girl hiding under a table in the library, I recall, if she believed in Jesus. She said yes, and they shot her, and they killed her for saying so. You know in today's climate some jobs might not be offered if you wear a cross or if you have a Bible on your desk for personal reading, you might not be promoted in some jobs. Some entire countries might be off limits if you are too bold in proclaiming who Jesus is for you.

Jesus did not ask for laid back, back of the line, quiet faith. He said in paraphrase, and this is a paraphrase, so you know who I am do you, Son of God, Savior, God in flesh, good. You take note of what kind of world this is. Take note of what they do to me. When I live out God's will openly and fearlessly, note what they do to me, then, if you will, if you will, take up your cross and follow me. Jesus prayed for those who know who He is. They are not of the world even as I am not of the world. As thou did send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. We are sent with God's love as Christ was, with God's Word as Christ was, with God's spirit, with His hope and forgiveness and grace, carrying a cross into the same world that killed Jesus rather than hear of His forgiveness and His grace over sin.

Know this, as the disciples unavoidably knew, there will be some cost even suffering if we follow Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. The days of laid-back service are gone, and many, many – as we look at the main line denominations – many, many who once attended church, are gone. Those who remain, and that is us, must be more and more serious and more and more public about proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, and God with us. In Him is the hope of the world. His life and His example and His spirit,

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which is the very spirit of God, is our power to become strong and to grow into the will of God. Will it be painless to take up His cross? Well, at this point, you might feel like that little boy who thought, I said, who thought that his school day was over on his first day of first grade. Some of you have heard this story. You might feel a little bit like him. He thought he had completed his first day at first grade. You might feel like him. You could identify with what he did. He did what he had always done at 12 noon, just as we at 12 noon will leave this sanctuary. At 12 noon, he packed all his little things together in his backpack, just as he had the year before in kindergarten, and he went out to where the buses were because he thought at 12 noon his day was over. The principal saw him out there. He noticed this first grader at 12:00 outside with his backpack, and he went and asked the boy why he wasn't in class. The child was a little bit irritated. He said, “You know, it's 12:00, both hands straight up. Time to go.” The principal said, “No, no, no, no, you are in first grade now. You stay in school all day.” The boy crossed his arms one way and then the other way, and he looked around, and he said, “Just who signed me up for this?”

Taking up Jesus' cross when it is tough, when we really have an enemy to forgive, when we really have the means and are called upon to be generous, when we really have a spat or a bitterness or a root of bitterness that grows between us and someone else within the church or when we really have an abuse of power either in or outside the church, when we really have a moment where God's grace or God's prophetic voice or God's love needs to confront it, we must take up our cross, and not just up until 12 noon here on Sunday, but all day, every day. Bear it! Jesus never said forgiving enemies or giving generously to build the kingdom or sharing our faith even with strangers would be easy or free from pain. It takes all day, every day, your whole life to come to understand what it means to become – and we are continually becoming – children of God, the God we have met and know through Jesus Christ. Why sign on for suffering and pain?

You know, our culture has all these commercials that describe the pain-free life. Have you noticed that? There is a pain reliever for everything. Now, there is something you roll on your head for headaches and some kind of a hot plaster for back aches and a different one for knee aches. Everything is becoming specialized. We've got all of these painkillers. Do you have a hole in your soul? They have these; you can ask doctor about and use Soulex. I'm sure it will come out one day. A new prescription drug guaranteed to stop you from asking all those annoying questions about meaning of life. We are told in myriads of ways, live a pain-free life. Get away from your troubles on a cruise! Get away from your troubles on a mountaintop or with a fast dissolving tablet or just by doing a spending spree and forgetting!

Jesus says take up your cross, all day, every day, into this world. Remember what kind of world it is. A cross speaks of sin and the need for forgiveness as well as assurance of grace from God. I'm not suggesting that we go out and look for pain. That would be a form of illness in and of itself. What I'm suggesting is that in a rich and full human life, some pain must unavoidably come. As it was with Jesus, often when we stand up for what is right and what we believe in, the world will take offense. Jesus lived deeply and

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completely in our world. Temptations, betrayals, He felt it all. He did not avoid the pain. It was simply unavoidable if He was to do what He came to do. He was not what Peter wanted Him to be, the warrior king that they wanted. He was – and only God could make Him thus – a suffering servant whose ministry would lead Him into the pain of Gethsemane and a criminal’s death on a cross. Such is our world, and such is our God, our God’s love. Such is our proclamation of who Jesus is. Pain is a part of living here, but entering into other people’s pain, carrying God’s love and the hope and the healing balm of Gilead is our mission and ministry. We are not alone. God is still with us. Our mission is to be with those in pain, to be with those lost in sin, to be with those lost in despair. God has come to me and to you in Jesus Christ. We are not alone. Yes, there is suffering, but even greater there is hope beyond the suffering. There is love in the midst of suffering. God is with us. God is here.

We must remember that Jesus is true life, not just a way of life, that Jesus is truth, and not just a man who spoke the truth. Jesus is God in flesh. You can spend your time here getting to know a lot of different things, but the time you spend is wasted if you don’t get to know Jesus, the Christ, God with us. Who is He for you? I pray that that question from Him to you bothers you and disappoints you with all the trivial things that we bother ourselves with until you can turn to Him and answer, okay, Jesus you are my Lord, my Savior, my God, and if you can already answer who Jesus is with the proper words, please do not as many of us are wont to do. Please do not stop with the proper words alone. Show your faith. Love each other. Forgive each other – even your enemies. Don’t judge one another. Make Him your Lord in word and in deed. Release the clenched fists of anger and greed and make Him the Lord of your word and deed. Amen.