

Lent 2B 2018 Sermon

Mark 8:29-38 (NRSV)

He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

In a hymn written by a British churchman and adopted by the British Royal Navy and U.S. Navy, we sing,

“Eternal Father, strong to save, Whose arm hath bound the restless wave, ... Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee, For those in peril on the sea!”

God, the Eternal Father, is “strong to save,” since, after all, he controls the very waves of the ocean! And when we are in trouble, we want to call upon someone who **is** “strong to save,” who has the power and strength to rescue us. In the first half of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has proven himself to **be** “strong to save,” for everywhere he has gone, he has performed miracles, healed people, cast out demons – he even raised a young girl from the dead! Strong to save, indeed! So it is no wonder that, when Jesus asks Peter who Peter thinks Jesus is, Peter replies, in effect, “You are obviously the Messiah! For nobody else could be so powerful as to do such healings, cast out demons, perform such miracles, and raise someone from the dead!”

But then Jesus says something to Peter and the other disciples which seems to totally *contradict* this image of Jesus as someone who is strong and powerful. Jesus tells his disciples, “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed...”

I envision a fuse blowing in Peter’s brain when he hears this. For there is no rational way to reconcile a vision of a miracle-working, demon-expelling, dead girl-raising Messiah with someone who undergoes great suffering, is rejected by the religious authorities, and is killed. So *of course* Peter rebels against Jesus’ statement about his all-too-human vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of the religious authorities and those who will kill him. Can you

imagine sailors singing, “Helplessly tortured, shamefully executed Son of Man, save those in peril on the sea!”?

And yet that is *exactly* what we Christians believe – that the power of God to save comes **not** through God reaching down from heaven with his “arm strong to save” and pulling us out of our sufferings. No. What makes Christianity distinct from all other religions is that we believe God became one of us and entered fully into human life, **including** the very depths of our sufferings and death. So after Peter rebukes Jesus for saying he must suffer and die, Jesus turns and rebukes Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

What are these human things that Peter is setting his mind on? And what are those divine things of which Peter is unaware or which he chooses to ignore? I think that if we look closely at this story and the chapters of Mark’s Gospel which have led up to this story, we will find an answer. And (spoiler alert!) it will **not** be what we *thought* the answer would be.

One way of looking at Jesus’ ministry up until this point in Mark’s Gospel is to focus on all the miraculous deeds of power that Jesus does: casting out demons, healing people, multiplying loaves and fishes, raising a dead girl to life again. In the first half of Mark’s Gospel, *that’s* what jumps out at us: Jesus’ miraculous deeds of power! So we readers of Mark’s Gospel, like Peter, naturally focus on, “set our minds” on, these miraculous deeds of power, and we think, “Truly, this powerful miracle-worker **must** be God’s divine Messiah, God’s Son!”

But in the Gospel story, **Jesus** calls *himself* **not** the “Messiah,” or the “Son of God,” but the “Son of Man,” or as some translations read, “the Human One.” While Peter and those of us reading the first half of Mark’s Gospel are focusing on Jesus as the divine Messiah, strong to save, Jesus himself is focusing on, and calling attention to, his humanity. His identity is “The Son of Man,” “The Human One.”

Do you see the irony? the paradox? Jesus rebukes Peter because his mind is set on Jesus’ miraculous deeds – which *most* of us would *think* **are** “divine things.” Miracles are “divine things,” are they not? But what Jesus is saying here is that the “divine things” which Peter should be setting his mind on are NOT the powerful *miracles* Jesus does, but rather the ways in which Jesus has entered completely and lovingly into the depths of human suffering and need. The heavenly Father is a God of mercy and compassion, as we read over and over again in the Old Testament (Jesus’ own Scriptures)¹; therefore, the “divine things” that Jesus wants both Peter and us to focus on, to set our minds on, must be his acts of mercy and compassion! All the flashy miracles appeal to the *human* ego: that part of us that values power and prestige; that part of us that wants to look good, press our own advantage, gain the admiration of others; that part of us that sees “our” group or nation as better than “their” group or nation; that part of us that wants to put **our** well-being above that of others. Yet, throughout the Gospels, Jesus sees such **ego** attractions as “human things,” not “divine things.”

I would suggest that there is *another* way of looking at what is going on in the first half of Mark's Gospel: We can focus our minds, not on the flashy miracles Jesus is doing in these chapters, but rather on the way that Jesus is always, always, always going toward, entering into, bringing life and healing to, the places of human suffering and need. I believe that from *Jesus'* perspective, **these** actions of entering into and identifying with humanity in all its sufferings and needs **are** the "divine things:" acts of compassion and mercy, *not* flashy miracles. The proof that Jesus is the divine Messiah, the Son of God, is that he is the Son of Man, the Human one. For if we look closely, we see that the miracles Jesus performs only serve the cause of relieving the human suffering he enters into. Jesus sternly warns his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah because he knows that people will equate "Messiah" with his miracle-working; whereas, the "inner meaning of 'Messiah' is really 'Son of Man,'"² the Human One. The miracles are **not** flashy proofs of divine power; they are revelations of God's love, a divine love that Jesus wants people to live into and live out from. This is the reason that Jesus also tells people whom he has healed not to tell anyone about it; for people might misconstrue the *meaning* of the healing to be proof of Jesus' miraculous power rather than of his self-giving love. Miracles excite the ego, to be sure; but the ego is part of what Jesus, in today's Gospel, calls "human things." Steadfast, loving, compassionate, self-offering love toward the suffering and outcast of the world doesn't "wow" the ego, yet it is precisely here that we discover the "divine things" of God. It is here that Jesus asks us to "set our minds."

So, let me ask you to become aware this week of where you are setting your mind: on human things, or divine things? Are you finding ego satisfaction (as I often do) in judging someone else in order to feel better about yourself or superior to "those other people?" Are you finding ego satisfaction in identifying with power – identifying with the most powerful nation on earth, or with some powerful person, or *owning* something that makes you feel powerful? Or are you entering into the sufferings of the world with love and compassion, doing what you can to help alleviate those sufferings, as Jesus did?

It is both enlightening and humbling to observe our own words and actions in light of whether they come forth from a mind set on divine things or on human things. And let us make no mistake: it makes a world of difference! For as Jesus says in today's Gospel, "... those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." We might rephrase that: "Those of us who want to save our *small* life – that life characterized by a sense of our "superior" status in relation to other people, groups, or nations; our over-identification with some ideology, party, organization, or "brand;" our looking out for ourselves first (despite the clear teaching of Jesus to deny ourselves and take up our cross); our neglect of those in need – those of us who want to save our *small* life will lose a far larger life in loving union with God and one another. And those who "lose" our *small* life – who *let go of* our ego desires for status, comfort at all costs, the privileges of race and class, our "rights" and freedoms which, when exercised, harm others – those of us who lose our small life for Jesus' sake and the sake of the Gospel will save that much larger life found in loving union with God and one another.

So observe yourself this week. Where do you give your attention and energies? Where do you bestow your awareness? Where do you set your mind – on human things, or divine things?

AMEN

¹ [NEHEMIAH 9:31; EXODUS 34:6; NUMBERS 14:18; PSALM 86:5; PSALM 86:15; JOEL 2:13](#)

² John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 226