

Proper 20, Year B
September 20, 2015

Mark 9:30-37 Jesus and his disciples went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

It was 1989, and I had taken my portable Smith-Corona manual typewriter (with which I typed my sermons) into the shop once again. The repairman told me that it was getting harder and harder to find parts, and that I should consider buying a modern electric typewriter, which I had resisted for years. As it turned out, my younger brother (stretching my mindset even further) convinced me that rather than buying an electric typewriter, I should get a computer. The question was: Should I get an Apple or an IBM? I decided on an IBM, since there were a lot of software programs available which would work on IBM machines but not on an Apple. On Apple computers, most Bible software programs available at that time did not work. The Apple operating system could not make sense of IBM programs or IBM data (and vice versa).

In our Gospel readings *last week* **and** *this week*, Jesus tells his disciples that he must suffer, be rejected and killed; and it is as if Jesus were trying to **input** an IBM program into an Apple computer: for the disciples could not understand the program or the data he was giving them. They had the wrong operating system. They needed a *new* operating system, a new frame of reference, a new mindset which could make sense of Jesus' teaching.

In *last week's* Gospel, Peter confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, that long-expected descendant of King David. But when Jesus began to talk about the Messiah having to *suffer*, be rejected by the Jewish authorities and be killed, it didn't fit into Peter's First-Century Jewish cultural mindset, his operating system; so Peter rejected Jesus' program. Then Jesus turned and rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus then began teaching them that if any would be his followers, they would have to deny themselves and take up their cross.

We should not be surprised that, given the established cultural and religious mindset of Jews in the First Century Mediterranean world, Jesus' teaching about a

suffering and dying Messiah and about followers having to take up their cross **did** not – *could* not – compute. The Messiah, they believed, was supposed to be *successful* and *victorious* and restore the Jewish nation to its rightful place of **power** and **honor** in the world – those were their operating assumptions – the inner code of their operating system. And here was Jesus talking about the Messiah’s suffering, rejection, and the most humiliating and excruciating form of death, and that this was what any of his followers would have to look forward to! In the culture of the First-Century Mediterranean world, and in the subculture of Palestinian Judaism, this **did** not, *could* not, compute. The culture, the mindset, the operating system, could not process these ideas.

And yet this was the Gospel message that Jesus had come to preach, so in **today’s** reading, Jesus tries again, talking to his disciples in private this time, saying again, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” [pause] Mark tells us, “But they did not understand what he was saying...”

We can only make sense of something if we can process it within our mindset, our belief system, our culture and subculture’s values and ways of looking at the world. In the mindset of most of First-Century Palestinian Judaism, what Jesus was saying made **no** sense whatsoever, for it spelled defeat, dishonor, suffering and failure – and their operating system could not process a such a program.

It happens to all of us whenever our habitual thought patterns are challenged or threatened by a new way of looking at the world or our present situation: we don’t understand, and we become afraid of even facing the possibility of changing our way of looking at the world, at life – of changing our operating system – that’s why the disciples are afraid in today’s Gospel. At our Church Development Institute, we were taught that every corporation, religion, denomination, or congregation has a “culture” made up of customs, values, ways of thinking about things, ways of doing things, what we find *commendable* and what we find **unacceptable**. Now, most of the time we aren’t *consciously aware* of our culture or subcultures - our operating system - for like icebergs, 90% of the assumed values and driving forces of any group lie beneath the surface. When we try to change some behavior in an established group or institution, it is like trying to move the tip of the iceberg: the tip isn’t going to move unless the 90% of our unconscious assumptions and values below the surface also move.

So it is no wonder that, although Jesus talks time and again about the last becoming first and the first becoming last (as he does in today’s Gospel story), it simply does not compute. For in a mindset which is absolutely sure that the first is first and the last is last, to call the first “last” is the very definition of absurdity.

Imagine, if you will, the first time that Albert Einstein introduced his theory of relativity to the world, trying to make us believe that if two identical twins were born today and one is sent off into space in a spaceship near the speed of light and

comes back 10 years later, the twin in the rocket ship will have aged only 5 years, while his identical twin on earth had aged 10 years. In the mindset of Newtonian physics, in **that** operating system, this does not compute; it seems patently absurd! We have to change the very constructs of our minds, our most fundamental assumptions about the way the world is, for we cannot understand Einsteinian relativity with Newtonian minds. Using one of Jesus' metaphors, "New wine is not put into old wineskins, or the wineskins will be destroyed, and the wine wasted." (Matthew 9:17) New wineskins are necessary to hold the new wine.

In order to understand the transformative teachings of Jesus and incorporate them into our lives, we must undergo what the New Testament Greek language calls "*metanoia*," which is often translated "repentance" but literally means "to change your mind." St. Paul writes: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave..." (Philippians 2:5-7) Now, if the richest and most powerful man on earth suddenly decided to give away every penny that he owned and sell himself into slavery, we might question if he was in his "right" mind, since certainly that kind of behavior is not what most people understand as "the American Dream;" our American culture's operating system simply cannot process that program. Even for us Christians, who have had the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament and the examples of holy monks and nuns and saints and mystics down through the centuries – even we Christians often find ourselves back with the old wineskins, the habituated mindset, the old operating system that puts our egos first and sees the world from a self-centered perspective, do we not? I know I do. Yet Jesus does not give us the same old wine, over and over again; he wants to give us some new wine, which requires new wineskins; he wants to equip us with new software to meet the challenges of our ever-changing world – software that will require the right operating system, updated from time to time to meet new and unfolding realities.

"Do not be conformed to this world," wrote St. Paul, "but be transformed by the renewing of your minds..." (Romans 12:2)

The renewing of our minds – the updating of our operating system – is a lifelong process. What operating system are **you** running? And which version? Is it time to renew your mind, that you might run more effectively the life-program Christ has for you?

AMEN