

Things have been going well in the Gospel story for Jesus and the disciples. Still, today's story is the turning point in the gospel story. Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah but gets it wrong. Jesus explains what is coming as they head to Jerusalem for the final confrontation with the authorities. Not only does Jesus tell his followers what is coming, but what it means for them as disciples.

Listen:

Mark 8:27-38

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them 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. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 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."

34 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. 35 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 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."

In real estate, they say location, location, location is vital. That is vital in our passage as well today. Jesus and his disciples and followers are at Caesarea Philippi. It is a town built by Phillip Herod, one of Herod the Great's sons, in honor of Caesars and expanded by Phillip to be his capital. So, in the story's background is the view of a city rooted in the powers that be. And all that happens takes place near the symbolic city of power.

With this as the backdrop, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Now, this is a two-sided question. It not only asks about their faith in Jesus and what he means to them but also asks who they are as followers of Jesus.

Simply, Jesus is also asking not only “Who do you say that I am?” but as a follower, “Who are you, how do you define yourself?” And that is true for us when we make statements about God and Jesus; we also are making statements about ourselves. We not only say what we believe but also confess the values we try to live by.

So, “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks, and Peter answers.

At first, Peter seems to get the correct answer: “You are the Christ, the Messiah, God’s anointed one,” he declares.

Jesus immediately says “Don’t tell anyone.” Jesus tells them to keep silent because, given the disciple's failure to understand what Jesus has said and done, he wants to ensure they get it. So, he tells them what it means to be the Christ and what awaits him in Jerusalem. He says he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days, rise again. This is the first time Jesus directly tells the disciples what is ahead for him.

This is not what Peter was thinking at all. Peter thought in those terms in the shadow of Herod’s and the Roman’s power. He believed Jesus was the new king sent by God who would restore Israel to greatness, throw off the yoke of Roman oppressors, exalt the poor, and establish a golden age of peace and prosperity. So, Peter is incredulous and again acts and speaks, as he often does, without reflection or awareness. He takes Jesus aside and forcefully says “**No way!** This is not who you are. You cannot die in such a terrible way. You are God’s anointed.”

Instantly, Jesus wheels on him and even more forcefully says to Peter, “Get behind me, you tempter.” Jesus says, “You’ve got it all wrong!”

One of the things I find amazing in this exchange is that Peter loves Jesus so much that he wants to protect him even when Jesus doesn’t need or want protection. Indeed, protection is the last thing he needs to fulfill his purpose. But Peter loves him so much he doesn’t want anything to happen to him, and He loves him enough to call him out when he thinks he is wrong. That brought courage on Peter’s part.

But we know Peter is the mistaken one. Peter’s got it all wrong, even though his instincts are well-meaning. He needs Jesus’ help to get him back on track.

My father used the expression, “Oh, for the Love of Pete” and “For Pete’s sake.” It was an expression of annoyance and exasperation. I can hear Jesus saying something like that to Peter as he fires right back, “You’re wrong!” and proceeds to tell him so in no uncertain terms. He says, “Get behind me, Satan!” These words are harsh. That is as it should be with what is at stake: Jesus’ whole God-given mission.

When Jesus tells Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” He is referring to Satan testing Jesus in the wilderness to give up his call from God to redeem us. And while it is harsh, Jesus still loves Peter. Notice that he doesn’t send him packing, and Peter doesn’t lose his place as the leader of the disciples. Instead, Jesus says to “get behind me,” which is the place of a disciple. “Take your place as one of my followers, but get where you belong behind me. Don’t try to turn me from my mission.” Jesus must remind Peter that Jesus is in charge, not Peter.

I don’t fault Peter so much for what he said to Jesus; it was spoken out of love. But it was also spoken out of a complete misunderstanding of what Jesus was about. Peter wanted another King David-like figure to restore Israel to past greatness and kick out the Roman oppressors. This was one of the main messianic expectations of the day that God would send a conquering Messiah. Peter couldn’t handle what he heard Jesus say. It shook him so much that he couldn’t even hear the part about resurrection. You can hear him thinking, “Who needs a dead Messiah? We need a new king like King David of the old to restore us to our past grandeur. And to be fair, in Jewish thought, the messiah was not thought of as one who would die.

We may not agree on much, but while it is a little different in the same vein, people still yearn for the church of the 1950s. It was the heyday for the church; churches were built and expanded because pews were full, children were plentiful, and the church still held sway in society. But even then, the cracks soon began to show, and since then, church attendance has fallen; nones and dones are the talk of those worried about the church's future. Those with no religious affiliation, nones, and those who, for whatever reason, are done with church, dones are rapidly increasing as a slice of our society. For a while, it was thought that the more conservative and mega-churches were immune to this, but that is not true; they, too, are shrinking.

We know that, in so many ways, the 50’s were dreadful. Racism, sexism, homophobia, ignoring the needs of people with disabilities, and environmental decimation were part of the 50’s as well as a boom time for the churches. We must confess that they blessed so much of these issues as God’s will.

Why is this happening? There are as many reasons as there are pundits.

People yearn for a program or person who will return us to our heyday. Many still think the right pastor or program will make it possible again to grow like they were in the good ole days.

But the reality of the church is different now. Those days are gone, so we must find a way to follow Jesus and be faithful when we are not on top of the hill. Many people ignore us and treat us as irrelevant, if not toxic. We have had our share of scandals to tarnish our image.

But, while many have dismissed the church, Jesus is still highly regarded amongst many of the nones and dones. We must focus on Jesus to speak to folks and not worry about what used to be.

To this we must follow the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus, whom God sent to restore, not our greatness of yesteryear, but to work on the restoration of humanity to God's original intent that we live in harmony with God and each other. Jesus was sent not to rule but to serve. And what that means is that he would show us through his life. Jesus was sent in love from the heart of God to show us the fullness of God's love for us.

As we focus on Jesus, the center stage must be his mission of compassionate, loving service rather than anything else. Whether or not this saves the church as we know it, it is the best hope for its future. I am not worried about whether the church continues as we have known it; I am concerned that we do our best to follow Jesus.

The church's form may change but will continue in those places where people continue to follow Jesus faithfully. And that is our mission.

I believe we are good people and try to be faithful. Like Peter, we get some things right and miss some things a little and some a lot. But Jesus is still there, correcting us and calling us to continue to follow him. He knows that in that following, there is a life filled with meaning and purpose, and that, I think, is the heart of the church's survival. We will continue to thrive where faithful people follow Jesus' call. It may be in a different form, but it will be the Church of Christ.

So, after dealing with Peter, Jesus utters some of the most misunderstood and misused words of all time. 'To follow me, you must take up your cross and deny yourself. And he speaks of self-sacrifice. This is the heart of the faith, following Jesus on the path he leads. I wonder if Peter and the disciples think, "I didn't sign up for this."

That is the thinking of many who choose a path with other would-be messianic figures promising wealth, success, and victory in return for our allegiance. It is the

promise of the prosperity gospel, the promise of religious and political demagogues through the ages, the promise of Rome, and the promise of Herod. Still, it is not Jesus' promise.

Jesus talks of suffering and taking up the cross. What does he mean by that?

But first, what he doesn't mean. He doesn't mean "You must allow yourself to be abused and mistreated." He would never ask us to stay in an unsafe, abusive relationship as was often counseled many years ago. We were not to seek out suffering, but Jesus warned us to follow him and live a life of sacrificial love that might come to us.

But sacrifice and suffering are involved. The idea of cross-bearing is not a literal command but a metaphor for allegiance to Jesus' life of self-giving love and sacrifice. This is not an easy sell in an age of consumerism and emphasis on the good life being prosperous.

Our message includes sacrifice because there is no such thing as love without mutual giving and receiving and sharing love. We give up some of our lives, agendas, and ways to be with one another. We actively will work for the good of others.

There is some suffering because the world is not yet set up in love. Power, force, coercion, us versus them, and rugged individualism are celebrated in many places. If you live the way of giving yourselves to others, you can be hurt by individuals and a culture that believe differently.

Jesus knows when we are to choose to act in love despite the risk of hurting; there is real life. We feel better about ourselves when we can say with integrity, "I acted out of love." It may cost us dearly in the short run, but as the years go by, we can look back with a sense of satisfaction.

We know that we sacrifice for our parents, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and friends. But our life of sacrifice is called to extend beyond our immediate circle of friends and family. We are called to undertake causes of peace, love, and justice that call us to a life of love. Our words and deeds may cost us, but Jesus wants us to know that the cost is worth it.

That is why people still follow Jesus; they have discovered that suffering is not the last word. Peter couldn't hear it then, but Jesus talks about resurrection being the last word and that life is one modeled on Jesus living in love for others, for us, and God vindicating that life through resurrection. And that is what Jesus wants: an abundant

life of self-sacrificial love. We know that Peter will realize what Jesus meant after the resurrection and live that way.

That is a life worth living for him and us.