

B Lent 2 2.25.24

Mark 8:31-38

Focus Statement: Jesus challenges and forgives.

Let's just name from jump, that is a rough place to end a reading. "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." Ouch. I don't know about you, but shame, Jesus being ashamed of someone, feels like a particularly harsh and loaded word. And I think Jesus means this, I'm not going to water it down. I think this is exactly as harsh a criticism as it sounds. I think this is true because I think part of love is speaking hard truths, and Jesus loves us enough to speak hard truths. And, because I think love is speaking hard truths, I also think as we unpack this reading, we'll find grace enough to find this harsh truth life-giving.

Lent is a jumpy season lectionary-wise, so let's take a moment to figure out where we are in the Gospel. Two weeks ago at the transfiguration, where we read how "six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John..." and was transfigured before them. This is the conversation from six days ago that the text was referring to.

We drop in in the middle of the conversation. In verse twenty-seven, we learn that Jesus and his disciples were on the way to Caesarea Philippi when he hit them with the question, "Who do people say that I am?" To which they rattled off a list of the great prophets of old. OK but, Jesus followed up, "who do you say that I am?" And Peter nailed it. "You are the Messiah." That was, for the record, the first time a divine claim about Jesus had been made by someone who was not a demon. The demons have been calling him the Holy One of God

since chapter one, the disciples hadn't until this moment gotten past teacher. So, Peter nailed it, to which Jesus, the text tells us, "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." Which seems like a weird response, until you read the part we read this morning, and realize that Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone, because they clearly didn't understand the claim they'd just made.

Which is not surprising if we unpack some history. First, a language lesson. Messiah an English transliteration of the Hebrew word *mashiach*, the Greek translation would be *christos*, where we get the title "Christ." Both Messiah and Christos in English translate to "anointed one." Jesus Christ in English is *Iesou Christos* in Greek is *Jaushwa Mashiach* in Hebrew. Same phrase, different languages. When we hear the title Christ, because we are Christians living after the resurrection, and thus knowers of the whole story of Jesus, we understand that phrase to have divine implications. Jesus the Christ is the son of God, the Savior of the world, Emmanuel, God with Us, all of this rich and powerful identity that the resurrection and the scriptures and two thousand years of understanding the power of those events have given us. Jesus' first century disciples, who were traveling around with him before his death, resurrection, and ascension, did not have the weight of that full experience. For them, Messiah was a political title. Messiah was the title given to the one who would come as a successor to David, to bring Israel back to glory. When Peter called Jesus the Messiah, he was expressing his belief in Jesus as a military leader, who was preparing to lead a conquering army into Jerusalem to drive out the Roman occupiers and reestablish the Israelite Empire of old. The disciples all thought that. If we kept reading to chapter ten, James and John are going to ask Jesus if they can sit at his side when he comes

into his glory, by which they mean can they be his seconds in command when he becomes king of Israel. Not what we know to be his glory, where the places on his right and left were filled with the bodies of others also being crucified.

Jesus told them not to tell anyone he was the Messiah for the same reason he rebuked Peter, because they were “setting [their] mind[s] not on divine things but on human things.” They wanted power and glory; Jesus knew true glory comes through faithfulness to the mission of God. The mission of reconciling all people to God, so that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus. And so committed was Jesus to the completion of this mission that Jesus would not let anything get in the way of that work. Here we have to be careful and make clear that suffering and death in and of itself was not the goal of Jesus’ mission, it was the inevitable consequence of that mission. Jesus was not put here to die; he was put here to restore the broken and outcast and reconcile all people to God. However, Jesus knew that his God-given mission and purpose was so threatening to earthly powers that those powers would stop at nothing to stop him. Completion of his mission of bringing the kingdom of God would require faithfulness through suffering and to the point of death. And, in the words of theologian Ira Brent puts it, the point of this story is that “Mark would rather see people following Jesus unpretentiously in this mission, and actually participating in this holy work, than waving signs or posting memes in Jesus’ name.” Saying the right words and calling Jesus Messiah is not the point. The point, as Jesus will go on to explain to the crowd, is a willingness to give oneself up so fully to participate in Jesus’ mission of reconciling the world to God that nothing will stop us in our pursuit of loving God’s people.

This passage forces us to ask ourselves the hard question, how far are we willing to go to participate in this mission? How uncomfortable are we willing to be? What risks are we willing to take? This is a hard question for us as modern-day Christians. It forces us to examine every aspect of our lives. Jesus is calling us to follow him to the cross, and there are some churches who aren't willing to give up even their favorite pew or worship time or hymn. And yes, I'm picking on other churches, because it's easy. We don't have pews, you guys move around all the time, we moved worship during the covid summer so no one would melt in the heat, and no one complained, and I already know you all love Ronnie and hate the hymns I pick, but all have different opinions about why my selection is bad—fun fact, no hymn will make everyone happy. Getting a selection where some of you at least less annoyed is the best I'm ever aiming for.

But this text asks hard questions of us as a congregation as well. How much space and control of this building are we willing to give up for the sake of Christ's mission? How much of my time are you willing to give up for the sake of Christ's mission? How much familiarity in worship styles are you willing to give up? How many new faces are you willing to tolerate? How much of a gamble are you willing to take that the Holy Spirit is doing something here? These are frightening questions. I know, they are questions that keep me up at night as well. Bob and Doug are not the only ones going grey over the budget, my hair was browner when I started here. But this is the call, dear people of God. "To deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow Jesus... For what will it profit us to gain the whole world—to have money, resources, this whole building to ourselves whenever we want it, and forfeit God's mission." We can have every success in the world, and find we are left in

the end with nothing of any real value. Power, money, prestige, and not a relationship to show for it. And what could we give in return for our life? God doesn't want our power, money, fame, or fortune. God's mission requires our dedication, not our glory.

This passage is HARD, dear people of God. It is hard because it asks hard questions and makes hard demands. And it is hard because it ends in hard stakes, if we are ashamed of this work and God's people, then God will, in the end, be ashamed of us. But, remember what I said about hard truth being a sign of love, and if we sat in the hardness of these truths we would find grace. Here it is. Notice the characters in the story. Peter and the other disciples. We just heard Peter get rebuked, openly and in front of all the others and eventually in front of a whole crowd, by Jesus. And not just rebuked, but the Greek is *epitimao*, which is the word Jesus used when he was casting out demons. That's how harsh his condemnation of Peter was. And then, six days later, who does Jesus take with him up the mountain to witness a glimpse of his glory, but the guy he just rebuked and the two he's going to call out in another few chapters, Peter, James, and John. On Maundy Thursday, we'll hear Peter declare, he'd follow Jesus anywhere, then on Good Friday we'll see Peter deny him three times, and all the disciples fall away, until no one was left at the foot of the cross but the women. These guys screw this up, dear people of God, and they screw it up again, and again, and again. And yet, in the end, and in so many moments along the way, they get it right. Peter will come to "truly understand that God shows no partiality." He will open the way of Jesus to the gentiles. He will eventually die a martyr's death at the hands of the Romans, indeed following Jesus all the way to the cross.

Dear people of God, the good news in this passage is that Jesus loves us enough to ask hard things of us. To make big requests of us. To push us past where we think we can be until we find ourselves standing in the Kingdom of God. Because we know from the resurrection that just as committed as Jesus was to completing God's mission, God is that committed to the project of life for all creation. Jesus died and three days later rose again, because God is a God of the living and death has no power over us.

And so, dear people, let this passage be hard for you. Let it ask you tough questions. Let it challenge your assumptions. Let it push you past your comfort zones and wonder how far you can go. Try and fail and try again, because trying and failing is a sign of God's unfailing love for you. God loves you too much for easy answers, God is too committed to the project of your life for that. Thanks be to God who loves us beyond who we know ourselves to be.
Amen.