

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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September 12, 2021

Mark 8:27-38

Peter gets it right in the gospel lesson for today. He gets it wrong too, but first he gets it right. Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Messiah.” That’s right.

Then Jesus does something that seems confusing to many of us. He says, “Shhh, don’t tell anyone.” Aren’t we supposed to tell everyone about Jesus? Aren’t we supposed to share the good news of Jesus with the whole world? Then why does Jesus order them not to tell anyone?

For that matter, why does Jesus do the same thing with lots of his miracles. Often, Jesus will have given somebody the ability to see or walk, and he says “Shhh, don’t tell anyone.” Why?

Well, about him being the Messiah: People at that time thought the Messiah would be a great ruler who would bring justice and return the nation to righteousness. We have that today. Many of us want a great ruler or president or whatever, who will implement our version of justice and bring the nation to our ideas of what is righteous. Problem is, we have different ideas of justice and different ideas of righteousness. Not that different from Jesus’ day.

Now mind you, Jesus stood for justice and called for righteousness. Nowadays anyone with any kind of power, whether political, parental, educational, financial, is required to seek justice and encourage righteousness.

Jesus requires it. But that’s not what makes him the Messiah.

Likewise, with the miracles, people thought that Jesus was the Messiah because he was a great miracle worker. And indeed, Jesus did work miracles. Jesus still works miracles. Some of those miracles are the textbook, Scriptural types of miracles in which people are healed of illnesses and saved from calamities in ways that only can be explained by divine intervention. Jesus also does the more ordinary but equally powerful every day kinds of miracles: the smile of a friend, the laughter of a child, the sun, bright in a blue sky, the green grass and trees, the moon at night. A torrent of miracles pouring down around us.

Jesus does miracles. But that's not what makes him the Messiah.

Jesus makes clear in the gospel lesson for today what makes him the Messiah. Jesus teaches that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the chief priests and elders, be killed, and on the third day rise." That's what makes him the Messiah: the cross and resurrection.

Now, the cross is like a flower or a person or a powerful piece of music. It is a mystery. You can't explain it completely. You can only describe it in a variety of ways. So here are three ways of talking about the cross.

The first way, you may be familiar with. It is widely known. Jesus died for our sins so that we could have a relationship with God and be in heaven. Paul speaks of the cross in this way.

The second way of talking about the cross goes something like this. In Jesus, God came into our world: into the world of time and space and concrete and grass and dirt and air. Jesus did not just come into the pretty parts of our world. Jesus came to sinners and tax collectors. Jesus even came into a part of the world which was humiliating and broken and terrified and cruel. Jesus came to the cross, and Jesus brought the presence of God and the love of God there.

Jesus still comes into the parts of our world and the parts of our souls that are most broken and humiliated and terrified and cruel, and Jesus brings the love of God to us there, precisely there, at the cross. That changes everything.

A third way of talking about the cross goes like this: Jesus trusted God. Jesus trusted God's insistence on human healing and wholeness and connectedness and life. Jesus trusted God's insistence more than Jesus trusted any other power of whatever kind:

more than appearances and reputation, more than wealth and poverty, more than painful death. In Mark chapter 3, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. This so upsets the religious authorities of his day so much that they immediately look for a way to kill him. Nevertheless, Jesus persists, even though he knows they are going to kill him, because he believes that God's life reaches beyond death. So he goes to the cross for the sake of our life.

Three ways of talking about the cross. Three ways of describing the same wonder, the same mystery.

Now, of course Peter can't stand this idea. He objects, he rebukes Jesus. Maybe he thinks that Jesus has been possessed by a demon because this surely will sound crazy to him, as it does to us today. The Messiah is not supposed to suffer. The Messiah is not supposed to die. The Messiah does miracles for us. The Messiah rules!

No. The Messiah goes to the cross. Moreover, this going to the cross is not a spectator sport. Being Christian does not mean just standing around cheering for Jesus because he did such great things for us and because he's such a hero. The cross of Jesus, the love of God sweeps us up into itself and makes us a part of its life at work in the world.

Mind you, we do not take Jesus's place. We do not become the Messiah, but Jesus says, "If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Notice, he says this quite openly. He does not say, "Shhh!" He gathers everyone together even the crowd and says, "You have to take up your cross too."

So what does this mean? Well, yesterday was the twentieth anniversary of 9-11. Can you think of anyone who carried the cross on that day? How about the firefighters and police officers and paramedics and other first responders who went into the towers to help people, even though they knew it was dangerous? How about the people in the months after 9-11 who said, "Our quarrel is with terrorists, not with Muslims. We fight terrorism, not Islam." How about those who stood up for their Muslim neighbors when people were pouring hate out in all directions. How about those Muslims who sought to build bridges with Christians and others, even though they were under threat? They showed us the cross.

How about more recently: The medical workers who cared for the sick during the height of the pandemic, especially in the days before we had vaccines. They risked catching the virus in order to help people, some of whom didn't even believe in the virus. Nowadays still, medical workers are overwhelmed, caring for people who couldn't be bothered to get a vaccine, or were too afraid. Exhausted, stretched in all directions. But they still heal. That's the cross.

How about someone who is being abused by a friend or spouse or lover? The journey of the cross does not mean that we just sit there and be walked all over like a doormat. It does not require us to just stay and be hit. Sometimes the journey of the cross is quite the opposite: to insist on healing and wholeness, even if it means leaving. That's a risk too. That's the cross.

How about those of us who care for elderly family members or friends? You ask folks like that, they say, "It's because we love them." "It's just what we do." Of course it's just what we do. And it's not always easy, but it's the cross.

How about when we are old, and we hurt, and we are sad, and we don't know why we are still here. And someone comes to help us and we don't feel like being helped, we feel like snapping at them but we remember that they are human, that they carry the presence of God in them too. So we look up at them instead and we say, "thank you." That's the cross. The most powerful force in the universe. Thanks be to God.