

Wallingford Presbyterian Church  
How Offensive Is the Cross  
Mark 8:27-38  
A Sermon Preached on Sunday September 16, 2018  
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
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I have been haunted by Jesus' words these past few weeks. As often as I may have preached on certain scripture passages it never ceases to amaze me how I can still be surprised by a word or a phrase that I somehow forgot or missed. And I missed it, of course, because I was focused on another word, another sentence, another thought being expressed by the spirit of God. And why was I more focused on a different word or passage? Because my life was different, because I was carrying different cares and joys and concerns in my heart and mind. Because something had happened in the world which needed to be focused on. That's the incredible power and beauty of scripture. It moves and breathes with us. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit makes the scriptures come alive for us where we are and we can gain insight and wisdom from the same bit of scripture as it answers different questions for us as it addresses our life and our world.

But I digress... as I said, I have been haunted by Jesus' words these past few weeks. Those of you who attended worship a few weeks ago might remember that we were reading from the gospel of John, in particular through chapter six of that gospel.

The chapter begins with Jesus feeding the multitude of men, women and children who were following him. They were curious and some receptive to his message. With five loaves and two fish the disciples get from a boy in the crowd, all are fed with plenty of leftovers to boot. The disciples and the crowd are awed by this miracle and see it as a divine sign. But they interpret the sign incorrectly. It isn't the reaction, the outcome Jesus wanted. They don't get it, they don't get *him*.

John's gospel comments, 15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him *king*, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

The following day the crowd catches up with Jesus and what follows in chapter six is John's beautiful poetic vision of Jesus as the bread of life. 35 Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

But all this is taken quite literally by the disciples and the crowd and it goes sour rather quickly. Jesus speaking in parables and metaphor inviting them to look beyond the words to see the heart, love and grace of God, and the people needing the facts and figures and needing to understand what's in it for them... in many ways, we're still there.

<sup>59</sup>He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. <sup>56</sup>Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup>Just as the living Father sent me, and I

live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup>This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.'

<sup>60</sup> When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'

<sup>61</sup> But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup> Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?

<sup>63</sup> It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life...

<sup>66</sup> Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

Yah... spirit and life verses the tangible... what we can see, touch, buy... give us the golden calf! You keep that spirit and life thing!

So people begin to walk away. This Jesus stuff is just too difficult, too hard to follow, too tough to understand, too demanding, too intrusive... just too everything.

And then there is this, <sup>61</sup> But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you?'

Wow. Jesus offers us spirit and truth and love and grace and because of our response *has to ask*, does this offend you? It started me thinking, how does Jesus offend us... how does Jesus offend you?

In today's gospel reading according to Mark we are invited to listen in on another conversation that takes place between Jesus and his disciples. Clearly, people are talking about him and Jesus wants to know what they are saying, how they are receiving his message, how they are interpreting the signs being performed. The thing is, you see, is that there were other prophets at the time, like John the Baptist, and Jesus is interested in knowing who people are saying that he is... because remember, he doesn't want to be king.

Peter declares what may be obvious to us today but what was not so obvious then, namely that Jesus is the Messiah... and that title translated into the conventional wisdom of the day meant a kind of warrior king who would free the people from their oppression. Peter gets it partly right. Peter has the right title but the wrong understanding. So Jesus tells them not to spread that news around because he is not that kind of messiah. Jesus knew that the world would not be changed by yet one more general, one more king, one more political savior promising the world to us. God's messiah would make the world different by turning it inside out by loving us into that change... by teaching us to love one another into the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus also knew that this kind of love would threaten the powers that be, religious, social, political, because we would think that kind of love is just too much.

So Peter confronted by the Spirit and life of Jesus vision for us responds for the world, for us, by

rebuking Jesus. And Jesus redresses the conversation by saying, you are setting your mind *not* on divine things but on human things... Spirit and life for God's sake verses what we want, or think we need for our sake...

In today's gospel reading according to Mark we are invited to join Jesus' disciples and answer the question for ourselves, who do you say that I am?

Does this offend you? ... Who do you say that I am?

Do we also have the title right but have the wrong understanding? Savior, Son of God, Son of Man Messiah? What are we looking for?

Harry Adams, Professor Emeritus at Yale Divinity School writes, "Jesus tells Peter that he is getting it wrong because "you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Of course Peter is looking at things from a human perspective; he is a man, after all. How else can he look at things? How else can he understand Jesus except from a human perspective? We bring our humanity to our relationship with Jesus as well. We see him as one who will support our human wants and desires. We see him as one who will sustain the values we want to enhance. We see him as one who will enable us to become what we want to become.

"But Jesus' word to Peter suggests that he can and must gain another perspective, that he can set his mind on "divine things." In our relationship with Jesus, there is the promise and the hope that somehow the divine perspective on who we are and what we are about breaks through. In him God enables us to find a way that is different from the way of the world, enables us to discern how life is fulfilled as God intends, enables us to live by values that are not embodied in the normal course of human affairs.

Love God, love your neighbor, love one another, pray for your enemy, become a servant, blessed are the poor, turn the other cheek, seek the lost, heal the sick, blessed are the meek, bring sight to the blind, be salt a leavening agent in the world, seek justice, lose the ego, be filled with Christ, give from your poverty, be a light in the darkness, be a blessing, take up your cross, follow, lose your life for my sake and the sake of the gospel and in so doing save it and the world...

Does this offend you? Who do you say that I am?

Peter went on to get it, he got the title right and the correct understanding, and we do too. We wouldn't be here if we didn't have at least a glimpse of that truth. And I wish I could say that life got so much simpler for Peter because of that. Blessed yes, joyful to the core yes, happy I'm sure from time to time, difficult no doubt. You can't follow Jesus and Love God, love your neighbor, love one another, pray for your enemy, become a servant, turn the other cheek, seek justice and all the rest. You can't do what we just got through saying in our worship service after the prayer of confession and the assurance of pardon, "be merciful in action, kindly in heart, humble in mind. Always ready to forgive as freely as God has forgiven us. And, above

everything else be will be loving and never forget to be thankful for what Christ has done for us,” and not have to pick up your own cross to follow. Just try to do that in your own family, just in your own family and it’s exhausting. To do that in your community of faith gets even harder, then at work, in the larger community, the world...

If we didn’t know the truth, had not experienced the risen Christ, we too might be tempted to walk away because it is too much.

But it isn’t. The love of God, is always sufficient to see us through. Jesus doesn’t offend, he empowers, energizes, brings peace and conquers fear just as we take up our cross and follow. That’s where we will find the spirit and life. I hope you know that to be true.

And if that is still hard for you then pray I believe Lord, help my unbelief.