

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of March 8, 2009

Our True Identity is in Christ (Mark 8:27-38)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the 8th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark:

“He called to Him the crowd with His disciples and said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it.’”

This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ, the Gospel reading today presents us with a classic case of mistaken identity. People were talking about Jesus in those days. All Israel was a buzz about Him. News of His miracles and teaching had been spreading like wildfire. He was hard to ignore. His teaching was powerful, it struck a nerve, it pointed to the truth, it was life giving. And His miracles were astounding beyond explanation. Everyone who heard of Him had an opinion about Him. But many attributed to Him the wrong identity. Many did not know who He really was. And so Jesus asked the question, “Who do people say that I am?” John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets...these were the common answers. He seemed to have many of the traits as the prophets before Him.

But then we see Jesus point the question to His own disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” He did not want His own disciples to have this case of mistaken identity about Him. He wanted there to be no doubt among them. This was a pop quiz.

Then we have Peter, being the bold and zealous one he takes it upon himself to speak for the other disciples. He says, “You are the Christ.” This was a glorious answer. It was a confession of the saving faith. So far, Peter passed the quiz with flying colours.

But wait, there is more. There was a second part to the quiz only it didn’t come in the form of a question. It was in the form of a statement. Jesus explained to them that He must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed, and after three days to rise again. This time Peter didn’t shine so brightly; just the opposite in fact. He showed that He was clueless actually as to what it meant to be the “Christ”, the “Messiah”. Peter showed that he was not much closer to the mark than those who said Jesus was only a prophet. He too had a case of mistaken identity.

It then says, “Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him”. This is quite an image we have here; Peter, a fisherman from Galilee rebukes the Lord of life. Here we see that Peter had lost sight of his identity and he had a classic case of foot-in-mouth disease.

Our Lord’s response was swift. He sought to correct Peter’s identity crisis. Jesus did not mince words; He did not pull any punches. He spoke with sharp words to bring Peter

back in line, “Get behind me Satan”. Talk about an identity crisis. One minute Peter is a glowing example of faith, the next minute he is unwittingly acting as an agent of Satan himself. What a contrast!

Friends, Peter’s problem essentially was that He did not want Jesus to suffer. On the surface this may seem reasonable. No one wants to see those they care about suffer after all. However, without Jesus’ suffering and death there would be no atonement for sin and we would all be lost. And so we see that Peter wanted to follow Christ though he didn’t really know how to do it rightly. At that time in Jesus’ ministry Peter thought that being a Christian meant a life that was free from suffering. However, just the opposite is true in this world.

We speak so very often about the cross of Christ in the Lutheran Church. We see crosses everywhere in the church. There are crosses on the Baptismal font, behind the altar; there are crosses on the side of all the pews, in the hymnals in the pews. Virtually, everywhere we look there is a cross somewhere. This is because the cross is the foundation of our faith. It is where Christ paid for our sins and won forgiveness for us; it is where He opened the way to heaven for all who believe; it is where He overcame sin and Satan and earned eternal life for His church.

And when Christ returns we will see and experience this eternal life in all its fullness. However, in the meantime we live in a world that opposes the message of Christ. We live in a world where Satan and the demonic realm oppose Christ and His church and tempt us to sin. We live in a world where we have a sinful nature that continually rebels against the Lord.

And so Jesus says to us, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” While we are certainly saved by grace through faith, having Christ in our life brings about a desire to change and to walk more closely with Him and to carry our own crosses with the grace He provides.

Friends, there is a saying: “I have seen the enemy and the enemy is me”. Our sinful nature is an enemy to our walk with Christ. If we are to follow Christ we must deny our sinful desires. Our Lord calls you to live in denial; not a denial of the truth, mind you, but a denial of the sin that takes us away from the truth we have in Christ. This season of Lent especially focuses on this.

Lent is all about arithmetic. It is about addition and subtraction. It is a season of subtraction in that we are called to subtract from our daily life everything that hinders our walk with Christ. If we love something more than the Lord we are called to leave that idolatry behind and return to the Saviour who loved us and gave Himself for us. The strength to do this comes through the word of the Gospel. As Romans 10 says, “Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ.” This is why Lent is also a season of addition. We want to add to our devotional life. We are called to follow Christ by first following His Words and feeding on them through daily Bible reading. We want to speak to Him through prayer and listen to Him through the words He speaks to us in the Bible.

To put it another way, it is time to add to our diet the daily bread of His Word and to starve our desire to sin. It is time to seek the Lord in His Word and prayer to have our faith enlivened; to be transformed from being spiritual couch potatoes into spiritually fit and healthy soldiers of the cross. It is time to turn from our self-indulgence and indulge in the Word of Christ. This indulgence is the one thing that truly satisfies our deepest needs for eternity.

The opportunity to indulge in the Scriptures is the sweetest pleasure and blessing in the world. Why is this? Because in the Bible we find the Saviour of our souls who will never leave us and gives us strength in the midst of our crosses in this world. Yes, even when we experience loss, if we get sick or injured, when loved ones die, when we feel hurt in this world we know that God has not abandoned us. God has said in Hebrews 13, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you". For Christ experienced these same things on the cross when He was abandoned by His own people, when He took on the diseases and sins and hurts of this world, when He felt the desolation of being alone and ridiculed. He did this so He might sympathize with our needs, and ultimately so we might never experience these things again in the heavenly Kingdom to come.

And so we take up our cross in this world so we may lay it down in the world to come. We deny our sinful desires in this world so we will not be denied on the Day of Judgement. And we seek Christ now so we may see Him face to face and enjoy Him in His Kingdom when He returns. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.