

**Sermon Notes for 9/13/15 (16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)**

**Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN by Mark G. Press**

**Text: Mark 8:27-38**

**Theme: PUBLIC OPINION OR PERSONAL FAITH?**

**The Point:** Jesus' path of suffering provides the strength and direction for His followers, who also must walk the way of the cross.

**Introduction:** Jesus troubles us. His words confront our self-centered ways and desires. He unmasks our hypocrisy and our unjust actions. He knows how unwilling we are to suffer ourselves – and yet how ready to cause others to suffer. Just see how He deals with the people closest to Him, His beloved Twelve apostles. Today's Gospel picks up the account of Jesus' final march to Jerusalem. He has just healed a blind man in a strange, two-fold healing. The man first saw people walking around but looking like trees. Then, the second time Jesus put His hands on him, he saw everything clearly. Now Jesus does much the same thing with the apostles. The healing of their spiritual blindness seems to come piecemeal as well.

So what does Jesus do? First, He takes the Twelve to Caesarea Philippi. This is not the maritime Caesarea, the city on the seacoast, playground of the Herods. Caesarea Philippi lies at the base of Mount Hermon, near the headwaters of the Jordan River, even beyond the northern areas of Galilee. Ancient pagan religion had located spiritual power and insight at this place, and there was in Jesus' day a huge temple (built by Herod the Great) dedicated to the pagan god Pan, the lusty god of music. It is not accidental that Jesus leads his little band right into the heart of spiritual power in a world dominated by a pagan worldview. It is no accident that you and I stand and live in the midst of a world dominated by a pagan worldview. We are here to declare the mighty deeds of the God who has created all things and who is about the business of renewing and restoring all things so that they praise and honor Him.

There on the road to Caesarea, as they pass through a number of tiny villages, Jesus asks a question based on public opinion: "Who do people say that I am?" They had a variety of answers, drawn no doubt from their interactions with neighbors and acquaintances. Some said John the Baptist had been reincarnated. Some said Jesus more closely resembled the legendary prophet Elijah, whose combat with the priests of Baal was well known to Israelite audiences. Others said simply, "One of the prophets." This sort of minimalist idea of Jesus as a prophet, one among many similar voices, has been repeated in many religious traditions, Islam being the most prominent of those.

Public opinion matters. It is no small thing. We need to be aware of it. Jesus would have been pretty disappointed if He had asked the disciples what people were saying about Him and they would have said, "Well, I don't know. I haven't really talked with anybody about you lately." Paying attention to the people around us is important, if we are to speak the Good News in a way that strikes to the heart. It is important to know what people are saying and thinking and how they look at life. But public opinion never serves as our standard of truth, right, justice, or righteousness.

That is why Jesus raises the ante. His words are urgent in the original language. He brings the word "You" (or "You all" – the plural form) to the very front of His sentence. "You, though, you who are right here in front of Me, you all, whom I have been teaching for these many months – what/who do YOU pronounce Me to be?"

Jesus knew that personal faith was far more critical for these apostles – and for every other human being alive – than any of their knowledge and experience of public opinion. That is why He goes on to ask the more vital question, "Who do YOU say that I am?" Public opinion may help us in shaping our message in a way that speaks clearly to the pagan worldviews that people hold. But public opinion can never be the foundation of personal faith.

It is one thing to be able to report what other people say. The well-known Barna Group does these sorts of surveys of religious opinions constantly. We should be thankful for people willing to dedicate their lives to helping us understand our neighbors. But just knowing (e.g.) that 52% of Millennials are not churched does not tell you how to speak to your new neighbor who is a recent college graduate. The fact that 96% of practicing Christian Millennials have a high view of Holy Scripture does not necessarily guide you to infallibly effective choices of studies that will hold the attention of a specific group of young people.

Peter's words were choice, right on target: "You are the Christ." Of course, that word "Christ" is the equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah," and it means "the Anointed One." Ancient practice called for anointing to be done for at least three different offices. Samuel anointed Saul and David to be king. When priests were ordained into their office, oil was poured on their heads to announce their being set apart for God's service. Elijah anointed Elisha to be prophet in his stead just before he was taken to heaven in the whirlwind. Prophets, priests, and kings experienced the anointing oil being poured on their heads, expressing their special service in God's kingdom. But One was coming who would fill up all those pictures of anointing, One who would serve as the ultimate Prophet, the true High Priest, the High and Holy King of all. Peter did well to recognize that Jesus was that One, THE Christ, THE Anointed One, THE Messiah come to set all God's people free.

Personal faith must find expression in our personal confession. This same apostle Peter, after the resurrection and after a long time of personal service, witness and suffering, had this to say to his readers (1 Peter 3:15-16), "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame." You can expect to be maligned by those who belittle you for your fairness, your integrity, your truthfulness, your faithfulness. But Peter reminds us that at some point people will want to know, will even "demand" to know why you act the way you do. If, at that point, you speak only about having had a good upbringing or being afraid of punishment, you miss the whole point. That is an opportunity to make the good confession, as Peter did, that Jesus is your Savior, your Messiah, and that you live to please and honor Him more than anyone else.

Of course, Peter the great Confessor, being at the same time sinner as well as saint, was just as likely to foul things up, as he proves almost immediately. Jesus welcomes the acknowledgement of Peter that He is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, the One who stands between God and man as fully representative of each class. He is at once the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity in one undivided person. But what the disciples need to realize, what they have such a difficult time incorporating into their image of Messiah, is that Jesus has come with the very purpose of dying. Our Messiah has not come as a mighty conqueror, ready to defeat ISIS and Al-Qaeda, eager to move His Christian armies into the Middle East to take over the oil supplies that can save the world. He has not come as a president or prime minister or king who will unite all nations of the world and establish a kingdom of prosperity and ease and security.

No, in fact Jesus comes as one who will accept the very worst of torture, humiliation and defeat that people can pour out. He will do this, not as a mistaken path or an unfortunate twist of fate. No, His suffering, as He puts it, **MUST** take place. This great "MUST" ("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") is not just the "must" of a world where hatred and perversity and enmity rule. This is the "must" of Almighty God, who has ordained that His Servant will be suffering in order to call people to Himself in a kingdom where mercy and forgiveness reign.

And if the Servant Himself, the King of Righteousness, the Prince of Peace, the Alpha and the Omega, has

been subject to suffering during His earthly time, we His followers dare not expect any better treatment. Jesus Himself taught, “A servant is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” Or again He says, “In this world you will have suffering.” In today’s Gospel these words ring in our ears: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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.” Suffering is inevitable, for we are fallen sinners living in a fallen and twisted world.

But this need not put us off, for we are people bound for eternity, where peace and joy rule forever. Martin Luther gives us insight in this excerpt from his writings: “If we consider the greatness and the glory of the life we shall have when we have risen from the dead, it would not be difficult at all for us to bear the concerns of this world. If I believe the Word, I shall on the Last Day, after the sentence has been pronounced, not only gladly have suffered ordinary temptations, insults, and imprisonment, but I shall also say: ‘O, that I did not throw myself under the feet of all the godless for the sake of the great glory which I now see revealed and which has come to me through the merit of Christ!’”

This little story told by a famous evangelist illumines this truth: I have a friend who in a time of business recession lost his job, a sizable fortune, and his beautiful home. To add to his sorrow, his precious wife died; yet he tenaciously held to his faith -- the only thing he had left. One day when he was out walking in search of employment, he stopped to watch some men who were doing stonework on a large church. One of them was chiseling a triangular piece of rock. 'Where are you going to put that?' he asked. The workman said, 'Do you see that little opening up there near the spire? Well, I'm shaping this stone down here so that it will fit in up there.' Tears filled my friend's eyes as he walked away, for the Lord had spoken to him through that laborer whose words gave new meaning to his situation. (*Our Daily Bread*)

Our Lord is indeed working on shaping us down here so that we will fit in and bring Him the highest glory in His final kingdom. That shaping may take some pretty serious chiseling on some days, but we can trust that the Lord knows what He is doing, even if we do not understand. Oswald Chambers has written, “Suffering is the heritage of the bad, of the penitent, and of the Son of God. Each one ends in the cross. The bad thief is crucified, the penitent thief is crucified, and the Son of God is crucified. By these signs we know the widespread heritage of suffering” (*Christian Discipline*).

One of the most potentially dangerous instruments in our daily discipleship is, as James points out in today’s Epistle, the tongue. “The tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

You can reflect on the various ways that your own tongue has fallen under this condemnation of the apostle. Peter got labeled “Satan” for his tongue’s attempt to rebuke and interrupt Jesus’ path to the cross. And yet the Old Testament lesson for today also speaks of the power of the tongue “to sustain the weary with a word.” Who are the weary around you this week, those who need a word of sustenance to keep them on the path of life, to draw their attention to the Lord’s rich storehouse of grace, to minister hope and encouragement in the midst of their discouragement and stress? Will your tongue be instructed by the Lord and His Spirit, so that you become a force for truth and justice and blessing?

**Conclusion:** You and I have been placed together in the life of this congregation. For how long, none of us knows. But we do know that, whatever suffering we may endure, we can rely on our Lord and Savior to

guide our steps as we yield to His direction. We need only to keep our eyes on Jesus and on the opportunities that we are given today and each day to bear witness to Him and to His messianic kingdom, to the honor and praise of His name. Then we can rejoice with Isaiah's words, "The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame." May those words resound in our hearing all our days, for Jesus' sake, AMEN!