

Lent 2B 2024 Mark 8:31-38

A few years ago a popular joke format made the rounds on social media: someone would name their profession and then post four very different pictures with the captions *What I like to think I do*; *What my friends think I do*; *What my mom thinks I do*; and *What I actually do*, with the *What I actually do* picture always portraying the least glamorous or most chaotic job responsibility one could imagine. The humor was in the disparity between people's perspectives and reality, especially between the poster's own expectations and their lived experience. The joke spread beyond jobs to include other eye-opening aspects of life: marriage, parenthood, owning a dog, playing a sport. It turns out we have many less-than-realistic expectations of life that life is more than willing to correct for us.

The conflict between Peter and Jesus that we read from Mark's gospel today is an argument about confounded expectations. Immediately before this, Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter answers, "You are the Messiah." In response to Peter's identification Jesus begins to teach them that he will face suffering, rejection, and death. That doesn't match Peter's expectations at all: the Messiah is God's chosen one; the word literally means *anointed*, and traditionally it was kings who were anointed. Peter, the disciples, and really most people would logically expect that the Messiah, God's anointed king, would enjoy power, wealth, and honor. Suffering, rejection, and murder should not be in the forecast.

We almost have to admire Peter's audacity: he boldly claims that Jesus is the Messiah, then immediately tells Jesus he is wrong because Jesus isn't describing what Peter expected. Peter is so convinced that he knows how God will act that even the Son of God standing in front of him telling him something different isn't enough to change his mind. Peter's motivation is probably commendable: he doesn't want these bad things to happen to his friend and teacher. And if it could happen to Jesus, it could happen to his followers, so we can see why Peter wouldn't want that either. But trying to persuade Jesus not to live out God's will is not the faithful response Peter thinks it is.

To clarify, Jesus is *not* saying that the Father's will and his explicit mission on earth was to suffer rejection and death. We began Lent with the claim that God does not desire the death of sinners; so why would God desire the death of his own beloved and sinless Son? If the only important thing Jesus did was die on the cross, then we can ignore how he lived and what he taught—which might be convenient, but then we'd have to wonder why the gospel writers went to the trouble of narrating it all. Jesus' suffering, rejection, and death weren't what the *Father* wanted but what *we* did to Jesus in reaction to his life of merciful, selfless service. He knew that when he followed God's way of love, humanity would respond with violence, yet Jesus did

what God requires—loving kindness, doing justice, walking humbly with God—and refused to veer from that path, even to save himself.

Peter wants Jesus to avoid hardship, but Jesus knows that although hardship is not the objective, it is sometimes—and in his case, absolutely would be—the consequence of doing what God commands in a world where sin still abounds. Jesus rebukes Peter by alluding to Satan because Peter sounds like Satan tempting Jesus, *If you are the Son of God...you can do the self-serving thing, you can take power by force, you can command the angels so nothing bad happens to you.* But what kind of God and king are we dealing with? Can Jesus be God's anointed king if his actions and methods are the same any other earthly king who uses whatever means necessary to achieve power and glory? Jesus' instruction to Peter—*Get behind me, Satan! Set your mind on divine things, not human things*—is a correction and an invitation: *Get behind me; get on board with what I'm doing, because this way—humble, loving, selfless service—is God's way.*

This is one of scripture's corrections to what we call the "prosperity gospel"—the idea that as long as we pray enough, worship purely, and obey God correctly we'll be rewarded with health, wealth, or whatever we want. But Jesus lived God's will perfectly and still ended up on the cross—not because he disobeyed God, but because God's kingdom doesn't follow the rules of this world. Jesus doesn't sugar-coat the cost of discipleship; the world deals out consequences for following his example. But it's still the right thing to do.

Jesus' first followers were mostly martyred for their faith, whereas in many ways we (at least in our country) are more privileged than other believers. Just imagine if there was school on Christmas but not on Ramadan. But Jesus' rebuke to Peter is still relevant to us, especially with the rise of Christian Nationalism—the movement to use the government to force one interpretation of religious morality on everyone. Jesus had the chance to do that—to be the kind of political king that Peter envisioned, who could demand obedience through force—but Jesus said no. God's kingdom isn't established through coercion or force or the rule of empire—the human way—but through the divine way of selfless lovingkindness to which Jesus was faithful, even when humanity responded with the cross.

Jesus doesn't send us to seek out suffering, and nobody grieves when we suffer more than God. Yet Jesus does invite us to live in selfless service to others, even when it would be less painful and more profitable to serve ourselves. We're about to sing *I Want Jesus to Walk with Me*, which is a great song, so long as we understand that it's Jesus—and not us—setting the path. Peter, and centuries of disciples after him, and certainly some days even we want Jesus to do things our way instead of disciplining ourselves to follow him. In this Lenten season and beyond, may we learn to more fully get behind Jesus and set our minds on things divine.