

Mark 8: 27-38 Denying Self

The passage from Mark's gospel this morning is called by some the hinge or pivot point of the narrative. The official reading from the lectionary did not include the first few verses which I read and actually earn the passage that name. Much of what Jesus does up until this point is accompanied by Jesus telling those he has healed not to tell anyone. There is much speculation about the why of this—especially considering that Jesus must have been fully aware that telling people not to tell something is close to insuring that they will. Since he is being followed by an increasing number of people, it is evident that the news of what he is doing and saying is spreading and drawing people to him. In that context as he is continuing his meandering tour of the Galilean countryside we have Jesus turning to his disciples and asking them two questions. These are very important questions which we still today have to answer for ourselves. The first question is: "Who do people say that I am?" We don't know if in the responses the disciples give they are answering from a sort of informal survey of what they have heard people in the crowd saying. We don't know which disciples answered this question, we are only told the question produced a list of possibilities in answer—the possibilities given are the recently executed John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets known to the people. It is interesting when looking at this list that none of the answers were the Messiah. Despite all that he has done, despite his immediate recognition by any demons he cast out—this last was not being given as a possibility for his identity. Jesus then directly asked the disciples a slightly different question. "He asked them, 'But who do YOU say that I am?'" Unlike the previous question with many possibilities listed by unnamed disciples—only one voice, Peter's, is heard. Peter supplies a single answer not given before. "You are the Messiah." This recognition by Peter is recorded in each of the synoptic gospels. Matthew and Luke elaborate on Jesus' response to Peter's insight, but Mark only has Jesus again telling the disciples not to tell anyone about him. He confirms Peter's declaration by ordering them to keep silent about it. But Peter's recognition of Jesus' identity changes the narrative profoundly. The next passage begins by Jesus beginning the explanation of what it actually means to be the anointed one of God—the Messiah—sent to redeem Israel. "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering." Great suffering, not just a mild ordeal. He will be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes. In other words, all those trained in the faith who should recognize his identity will reject his presence in the world, his mission to them and the people. He now tells the disciples that this rejection will result in that great suffering and his death. Our text also includes what becomes the good news—after three days he will rise again. Mark tells us that at this point he says all this quite openly. He tells them that the establishment of the religion that worships in the Temple, that claims to represent the will of the Father, will reject him and contribute to his suffering and death. What is also contained in this teaching is that this "must" happen. Jesus will undergo this by God's design—that is what being the anointed incarnate word of God means. We are very accustomed to walking through this entire story—the rejection, the suffering, the death and the glorious resurrection; but this would not have been a journey that the disciples would have contemplated. It was beyond their ability to grasp—this man who walked with them and was capable of performing all the things that they had witnessed—this man with so much power—surely he would be a leader who would end the oppression of Rome, who would restore Israel to what they saw as its rightful place—surely these things he had just told them were wrong. Especially if Peter had his

identity right—surely this lesson he was starting to teach them could not be. And Peter was probably speaking for all of them when he took him aside and began to rebuke him for this unpalatable lesson. The disciples never seemed to understand exactly who Jesus was, knew that he was someone to follow but had formed their own expectations over where the journey would end—and this was not where they wanted to go. We are all familiar with Jesus' response to Peter's rebuke. Turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan!" In Peter's protest about the teaching of the meaning of being the Messiah, Jesus recognizes another temptation—a temptation to turn from the purpose for which he came. Peter wants the reality of Jesus' Messiah-ship to be a different, a less painful reality. Peter's response to the possibility of Jesus' suffering and death is understandable. As Jesus continues his rebuke, he tells Peter that he is setting his mind not on divine things, but on human things. At this point Jesus looks beyond the disciples to the crowd which is walking with them to the village of Caesarea Philippi. "He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." And here is where we confront that question of who we say Jesus is in the deepest sense. What does Jesus mean when he says "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Because I have to say that "deny yourselves" is not high on anyone that I know priority list. And I will admit that this phrase has always been somewhat problematic for me as well. It rubs up against my incarnational reformed theology that says who I am matters to God. And Jesus wants me to deny that? No thanks. I've worked really hard to be me, to establish and value myself. I'm not giving that up now. Denial is ever so popular during Lent. Many of us jump on the denial bandwagon and give up all and sundry aspects of our lives that actually might simply give us joy; like a favorite show or treat. But is that self-denial? So what if we take the phrase deny yourself literally, what does it involve? The only other place in the entire New Testament where this Greek word translated as deny is used is when Peter denies knowing Jesus in the courtyard of the chief priest. So I think it is clear that Jesus is not saying that we have to give up this or that thing, or try to forget our normal human needs, or live some ascetic life. Self-denial is not about self-abnegation, but is actually more difficult. It is to set aside your own interests in order to ascertain God's interests. It is to state that, in effect, you do not know the true You. You don't truly know the you that God calls you to be. So you have no idea what that You person would want. Doing this opens you to be ready to do what God wants. This self-denial is not just about our own selves. When you seek to deny self in this way, when you deny your autonomy, when you deny individualism, then you make yourself open to intimacy with others and to a community where relationships matter the most. This happens because God choose to be a God of relationship, to desire human relationships. Because God made humanity in God's own image, because God chooses to be in relationship with us, then to be our true selves is to be connected. So we must deny the self that is centered on itself. Jesus' charge is not a demand to deny your true self, but to realize it. It is an invitation to imagine that your self needs the other. Desperately. Intimately. Because this is what to be human is all about—intimacy; belonging; relationship. We can't be ourselves on our own. What we have then is a self-absorbed existence. It is to become narcissistic in its truest form, where those around you are only there as pawns to placate your self-perceived power and importance. But the verse doesn't stop with the invitation to deny self. In fact, Jesus here gives us a three part formula for

being his disciple. We need to get all the parts or we miss the point he makes. First, there is the denying of one's own interests. THEN there is taking up the cross. One of the key lessons about this part is that "bearing our cross" is NOT about dealing with some normal suffering or problem or part of human existence. That happens to everyone, every day. When Jesus took up his cross, what did he do? He chose (he wasn't forced) to carry out the ministry that God wanted him to do. THAT is what "take up your cross" means—you make an active choice to live into the ministry that God has called you to do, every day. But that verse had a third instruction. It ended with "and follow me." This last part is crucial. So many times in seeking to deny self and pick up that cross—even if we have gotten those parts of discipleship right, we forget this last. A commentary on this passage described the process this way—imagine this modern day disciple who has a backpack filled with whatever he needs to live his normal daily life, then he denies self and picks up a backpack that Jesus hands him that is filled with whatever is needed to do the ministry he is called by God to do—and then, before Jesus can say anything, this earnest disciple just starts off down the street with the backpack Jesus gave him, but heads in the wrong direction. Jesus said to deny ourselves, take up our cross of personal ministry whatever it may be, and then follow him. Guess what? When you follow someone, you wait on their lead. If I'm going to follow you in your car so you can show me the way to a new location, I don't leave first...and I don't zoom past you while we are on the way. I stay behind, watching for turn signals and such. I let you lead. As we follow Jesus, there will be directions given along the way. There will be times Jesus says to "go" and times when he will ask us to "wait." There will be times he will say you know what to do, work hard. There will be times when he will say "stop working and rest for awhile." And there may even be times when he will say "give me that backpack and wait here. I'll be back with your new backpack in a bit." All of that is part of "follow me." The Lenten season is an excellent time to begin this process of trying to become a better disciple. We may begin with self-denial, but it is important to go beyond the easy things—to truly deny our self interests and seek what God has in mind for our journey and then follow his directions along the way. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.