

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 15, 2024 (Proper 19, Year B)
Mark 8:27-38

In a memoir of the years before World War II, Pierre Van Paassen tells of an act of humiliation by Nazi storm troopers. They had seized an elderly Jewish rabbi and dragged him to headquarters. In the far end of the same room, two colleagues were beating another Jew to death, but the captors of the RABBI decided to have some fun with him. They stripped him naked and commanded that he preach the sermon he had prepared for the coming Sabbath in the synagogue. The rabbi asked if he could wear his yarmulke, and the Nazis, grinning, agreed. It added to the joke. The trembling rabbi proceeded to deliver in a raspy voice his sermon on what it means to walk humbly before God, all the while being poked and prodded by the hooting Nazis, and all the while hearing the last CRIES of his neighbor at the end of the room.

Philip Yancey wrote, "When I read the gospel accounts of the imprisonment, torture, and execution of Jesus, I think of that naked rabbi standing humiliated in a police station. Even after watching SCORES of movies on the subject, and reading the Gospels over and over, I still cannot fathom the indignity, the shame endured by God's Son on earth, stripped naked, flogged, spat on, struck in the face, garland with thorns.

Neither could Peter, and that is why he protests so vehemently. That the MESSIAH, whom he has now recognized, should SUFFER at the hands of the Roman enemies on a cruel and shameful cross was unthinkable."

Don't think for a SECOND that YOUR reaction would be any DIFFERENT than Peter's, when he tries to tell Jesus not to SAY things like that. WE would do the same thing.

That's why Jesus NEEDS to SAY these things – that he 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. He needs to SAY them, because WE REALLY don't want to HEAR them.

Peter may have made the right confession, said the right WORDS, that Jesus was the Messiah, but he had the WRONG idea about what that MEANS.

Jesus asked "who do people say that I am?" and people were saying a LOT about what the Messiah would be LIKE. They thought the Messiah would be a conquering hero, who would come in power, and with a sword wipe out all the enemies of Israel. Through the Messiah, God would establish and protect an everlasting kingdom on earth, with Israel on top.

And that sounded pretty GOOD to PETER, because that put HIM in line to be Vice President, or SOMETHING like that. It seemed like a pretty good gig.

So Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." CLEARLY! But we CLING to those PRECONCEPTIONS: We won't let them go for ANYTHING. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them DENY themselves," but rather than deny HIMSELF, Peter will deny JESUS. He'll follow Jesus to the JUDGMENT hall, but NOT any further. He won't BELIEVE that Jesus must suffer and die until it actually HAPPENS.

We PREFER POWER. We LIKE the stories of Jesus' miracles, how he heals the sick and calms the storms and casts out the demons and stands up to the authorities. We LIKE THAT side of Jesus, but the loving and serving and DYING – THAT we would rather DENY.

Think about the history of the CHURCH. From the crusades, to the inquisition, to the abuses that led to the Reformation, to the clergy SEX abuse scandal – they were all about POWER, about the church ABUSING power, trying to exercise FORCE with a power it was NEVER meant to HAVE.

Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

We still do. We try to MAKE God SEE things OUR way, DO things the way WE want. And isn't that the very DEFINITION of being LIKE Satan? It's wanting to CONTROL God, BE God for OURSELVES.

For example, have you noticed that there's NOT a lot of CONNECTION these days between our claims about WHO JESUS is, and our choices in HOW we live our lives? We say one thing on SUNDAY morning, but our LIVES say something completely DIFFERENT on MONDAY morning, and ESPECIALLY on Friday and Saturday NIGHT.

Jesus says, "Who do YOU say that I am?" On Sunday morning, Christians SAY that God is love, but during the WEEK, we see Christians spewing all kinds of VILE and HATEFUL rhetoric about people they know NOTHING ABOUT.

And NOTICE WHERE Jesus asks his question. He doesn't ask on the Sabbath or in the synagogue; he asks it OUT in the CITY, a ROMAN city, NAMED after CAESAR, a city FILLED with PAGAN temples and images. It was the everyday WORLD that people LIVED in. With ADVERTISEMENTS EVERYWHERE.

It was OUR MONDAY morning, when we go BACK to our REGULAR LIVES and work and play. THAT'S where Jesus asks US the question. And what we say out THERE in our everyday LIVES, says a WHOLE lot MORE about WHO we think Jesus is, than what we say HERE in THIS place.

You can't ANSWER Jesus' question without revealing who YOU are. And the REVERSE is ALSO true. WHO you ARE REVEALS who you believe JESUS is.

So let me be clear. You can't be a CHRISTIAN and HATE gay people. You can't be a Christian and hate people of a different SKIN color. You can't be a Christian and hate people for LIVING DIFFERENTLY than you, LOVING differently than you, WORSHIPPING differently than you, VOTING differently than you. You can't be a Christian and HATE people at ALL. Who you ARE reveals who you think JESUS is, and THAT'S NOT JESUS. That's NOT our CHRISTIAN FAITH.

In the first letter of John, he wrote: "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are LIARS; for those who do NOT love a brother or sister whom they have SEEN, CANNOT love GOD whom they have NOT seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love GOD MUST love their brothers and sisters ALSO" (1John 4:20-21).

There's a well-known quote from Anne Lamott. She said, 'You can safely assume you've CREATED God in your OWN image, when it TURNS OUT that God HATES all the SAME people YOU do.'

Jesus put it this way: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things...." "If any want to become my followers, let them DENY THEMSELVES and take up their CROSS and follow ME."

You see, our Christian faith is more than just WORDS; it makes a CLAIM on us. Who you SAY JESUS IS, is WHO YOU have decided to BE. To BE a Christian is to BECOME MORE LIKE HIM. Your identity can't be SEPARATED from WHO JESUS is. And Jesus doesn't desire ONLY that we come here on SUNDAY morning and say, 'Jesus is Lord'; Jesus' WILL for us is that our LIVES on MONDAY morning will LOOK like HIS. Who you ARE reveals WHO you believe JESUS is.

To be a Christian is to LOVE – love who HE loves and SERVE who HE serves, and to know that you'll NEVER look into the EYES of someone that God DOESN'T love. To be a Christian is to accept and celebrate that EVERY person you DISAGREE with is a beloved child of God that Jesus DIED for. To be a Christian is to DENY YOURSELF, and YOUR OPINIONS about people, and LIVE for OTHERS.

"Who do YOU say that I am?" Peter had to ANSWER that question, and so do EVERY SINGLE ONE of Jesus' disciples, for themselves.

And so do YOU. Jesus is looking at YOU. "Who do YOU say that I am? More importantly, who does your LIFE say that I am." Amen.