



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, September 16, 2018

Proper 19

Isaiah 50:4-9a | Psalm 116:1-9 | James 3:1-12 | Mark 8:27-38

DONNA WESSEL WALKER

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts together be acceptable in your sight, o Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

When I was in high school, a guy in the church youth group looked at my necklace one day and said to me, "If Jesus had been executed in the 20th century, would you wear a little golden electric chair on a chain around your neck?" I was taken aback: I was new to a commitment to Jesus in an authentic, full-fledged faith of my own, and I was genuinely worried about doing something that would make Jesus ashamed of me: that seemed like the worst thing that could happen. So my gold cross necklace was a little statement that I had joined the Jesus movement. Yet that guy argued strongly that to make the cross into a piece of jewelry was to trivialize it, to make the cross an accessory rather than the center of my life of faith. I had to admit that wearing that necklace was hardly taking up the cross the way Jesus asked of whoever would follow him.

Hard words, perhaps, but it was good for me to struggle with what I meant in even small efforts to follow Jesus. Hard words sometimes belong in our conversations about faith, when we are in danger of going astray or losing the main point. No wonder both Isaiah and James warn about the responsibilities of teaching others and the power of the tongue! Hard, even harsh words abound in this morning's gospel lesson: Jesus warns the disciples against loose talk; Peter rebukes Jesus; Jesus rebukes Peter and then goes on to give a call to discipleship so severe that it makes us flinch.

These hard, austere words from Jesus indicate how high the stakes are for him right now. This passage marks a major turning point in Mark's gospel, where Jesus moves from his teaching and healing ministry to head towards Jerusalem and his own death. Jesus has withdrawn to the area of Caesarea Philippi, a city northeast of Tyre. This is as far north, so far as we know, that Jesus ever went; from here he sets his steps towards Jerusalem, about 100 miles to the southwest.

He pauses here to check in with his disciples and to give them a sense of what's coming, to clarify what they've signed on for. He begins, as he so often does, with a

question. "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples indicate that people have been trying to figure out Jesus in terms of their tradition: he could be another Elijah, or a John the Baptist, or a new prophet in his own right. "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks them. The disciples have indeed been asking this question themselves: "who is this, whom even the wind and the sea obey?" Reflecting their experience of Jesus, Peter blurts out, "you are the Messiah." Did the answer come out of his mouth before he knew it? Or had Peter been pondering this possibility for a while? What did he even mean by the term "Messiah"? There were enough possible meanings floating around 1st-century Israel to make it impossible to say what that title meant: maybe a political revolutionary who would overthrow the Roman Empire and re-establish the kingdom of Israel; maybe a royal king in the line of David, whom God would place on Israel's throne and establish an imperial, possibly global reign; maybe an eschatological conqueror who would not just rule on earth but would bring God's reign to bear in an entirely new world order, possibly a new world itself. It's not at all clear which of these ideas, if any, Peter had in mind. What is clear from all of these concepts, however, is that the Messiah was expected to be a winner: Peter has the satisfied sense that he has joined the winning team.

Given the confusion of all these differing ideas floating around, and the undefined way Peter uses the title "Messiah" it is not surprising that Jesus tells the disciples not to talk about this to anyone outside their circle. For Jesus intends to define his role as Messiah himself, and his understanding of that role is contrary to normal expectations: he has not come to kill but to die, not to vanquish but to liberate, not to overrule but to raise up. He is going to Jerusalem to face suffering and death, so he warns his disciples clearly before getting to that mysterious promise to rise again after three days.

Peter is horrified. Whatever his hopes for the Messiah may have been, they did not include shame, suffering, and an ignominious and excruciating death. So Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to silence him: he grabs Jesus' elbow, pulls him out of the group, and says "Shut up! You can't mean that! You can't talk like that!" Hard words. Harsh words, born of Peter's desperate love for his friend and teacher.

And born of the usual expectations of what deliverance should look like: Peter thinks that when the Messiah brings us to God it should look and feel like winning and greater life, not losing and death. There's a lot in Peter's reaction that I understand, that I even share. I want Jesus to give blessing and happiness, to deliver me and those I love from suffering and death. I want the reign of God to look and feel like winning. And much of contemporary Christianity, it appears, shares that hope. It's not just the appalling caricature of Christianity of the "health and wealth gospel" that promises riches and wellness for true believers. It's also our own surprise when bad things happen to good people, or at least the people we love. It's as though, like Peter, we cannot face the fact that the worst things happened to the best person, that Jesus himself suffered and died a grievous death, and that in doing so he was following God.

So now it is time for hard, harsh words from Jesus. He rebukes Peter: "Get away behind me! You are Satan, the adversary! You are opposing God's way for me!" Rejection, name-calling, accusations: not what we expect from Jesus. But these hard, harsh words display how high the stakes are for Jesus, for Peter, and for us. The mystery of our redemption is that it came through the path of suffering and death: Jesus accepted that and had to oppose vehemently anything that attempted to deflect or stop him on the path God had called him to. It's not just for his own sake that Jesus is harsh here, however; he's not just fiercely resisting temptation. Jesus is loving Peter himself in these harsh words. If Peter could not accept the work of God that Jesus was doing, then he would indeed be opposing God, and that would lead to his death; not to the redemptive death of Jesus but to the eternal death of separation from the source of all life. Jesus is calling Peter to the way of life in the strongest terms he can muster. These hard words are in fact loving words.

Jesus then calls the crowd to him (here we can put ourselves in the picture) and generalizes the warning he has given to Peter. Jesus is following the way of suffering and death that leads to life; to be with him we must go on that way too. But to go that way means to accept suffering and death ourselves. What kind of death? What does Jesus ask us to do when he asks us to take up our cross?

Jesus asks us to deny ourselves: our self-protecting, self-regarding, self-centered ways that look for winning rather than serving or for honor rather than shame. He asks us to look at the needs of others, to know that we are among the lost and to accept his deliverance, and to share the life he gives freely, openly, honestly with others. No pretense, no shame. Taking up my cross doesn't mean wearing a little necklace, but living my life in visible allegiance to Jesus and in companionship with his followers.

Jesus invites us to come on the dusty road to Jerusalem with him. He gives us his company on the way. Like Peter and the disciples, we have moments of joy and even of glory: the Transfiguration, shared stories, the meal he gave to share himself with us. Jesus loved his disciples, and us, in those events. There are to be hard times, also: Peter himself brags, and then fails and deserts and denies Jesus. Perhaps we too brag, and then fail, and even deny Jesus. There is shame, suffering, and death. Jesus loved Peter in those times; he loves us in those times too. Jesus restored Peter; he restores us, too. For the end of this story is not death: death is the way to the end of the story, which is Resurrection and Life. Jesus opens to us the way to get there, and offers to take us there himself. There is no love greater than this.

Amen.