

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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We've been working our way through Mark's gospel during the summer (except for the few weeks we were in John). And, we will continue reading through Mark until the end of November with only a few departures. Today's gospel reading is important. This is a key turning point in the story and will set the stage for all that is to come. Up to this point, things were going relatively smoothly. There were miracles, healings, feedings, and a few scuffles, but nothing too dramatic. But, from here on, things turn a bit darker. Going forward we'll hear of conflicts, arguments, and Jesus' predictions about his death a couple more times.

And this transitional moment isn't something unique to Mark's gospel. In fact, all three of the synoptic gospels (that is Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell of Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah followed by Jesus' prediction of his death. Both Matthew and Mark, continue with Peter's rebuke of Jesus, and Jesus' rebuke of Peter. Then all four gospels come back together to tell us that Jesus taught about saving and losing one's life with the final command to take up their cross and following Jesus.

This transition is so important for our exploration in the weeks ahead. We get two critical aspects in this passage. The *first* critical aspect was Jesus being named as a messiah, anointed one, or in Greek, Christos, or Christ. It is a title that was already applied to kings of Israel, the high priest, prophets, and even the ideal future Davidic king. It gives us an idea of why the religious

and political leaders found Jesus so threatening. You see, if word gets out that Jesus was trying to overthrow the way the Romans rule or that the temple authorities have missed the presence of God within Jesus, well then, they are both out of a job. Their power is removed. And we know that far too often that when people have power and selfish drive, then they'll think of any way possible to keep it.

Yet what Jesus said was that power, privilege, and control aren't the way of messiahship. No. The way of the cross was how Jesus would rule. He was like the suffering servant foretold by Isaiah. Being Christ is more like dying than defeating enemies. Being anointed is less about power over than about service and love. Being the messiah is less about conquering and ruling and is more about rejecting violence and overcoming selfish pride.

And that leads us to the *second* critical aspect that will define our exploration in the weeks ahead. There is a juxtaposition between Christ's messiahship and the world's understanding of the anointed one. And this is where Peter got caught up. You see, Peter held on to a worldly view of the messiah. Peter didn't sign up for persecution. Peter didn't want to hear about death. Peter ain't interested in rejection. Peter doesn't want to imagine suffering and death. Peter was looking for an entirely different type of messiah. Peter was looking for some person or thing who would sell him a false bag of goods promising that everything will always be sunshine and roses. Peter was looking for a faith built on some magic words, that if he only accepted Jesus Christ as his Messiah then he'd be set and good. Peter was looking for the money, he was seeking power, he was wanting a mansion and military strength. After all, that's what the world vision of the messiah was and is all

about. Yet, Jesus said “get behind me, you tempter.” Jesus said, “follow me.” Jesus said, “take up your cross.”

And how often are we like Peter? Or how often are we attracted to the Peters of the world? We seek power. We run the race of lining our pockets with money. We destroy our lives so that we can buy a bigger home or build a bigger ego. We easily find ourselves hearing the tempter tricking us into thinking that there isn't enough, that we don't have enough, that we're not skinny enough, straight enough, white enough, smart enough, and pretty enough. We are convinced that what life is about is proving that we are good enough, that we have enough, and that we are enough. That is the lie that the world feeds us. That's the Peter inside each of us.

Today, Jesus says, “get behind me, you tempter.” For Jesus' mission is more than about leftover bread and calming storms. Jesus isn't on a suicide mission for salvation. Rather, Jesus' mission is focused on living fully and living for others.

Today's gospel story reminds me of the research of Dr. Michael Norton who is a psychologist who works for Harvard Business School. In his TEDTalk, he shares details about a variety of experiments he conducted looking at money and happiness. Those results convinced him that money *can*, actually, buy happiness. Yet, the shocking, dare I say cross-like, results were that money *only* buys happiness when spending your money on others.¹

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsihkFWDt3Y>

And that's the thing about today's reading and the whole of Jesus' ministry. That cross-shaped process of following Jesus isn't about crucifying yourself, or saying magic words to get into heaven, or believing the lie of prosperity gospel preachers. Rather, following Jesus is about coming to understand that giving is living. That living for others is the way of abundant life. That following Christ requires us to assess our selfish tendencies and turn towards a life of love and justice and peace.

And so, what does that look like in Wicker Park today? Well, it looks a lot like giving of our money to create over 90 bags of love last weekend and then sharing them with our unhoused siblings. It looks like this church sponsoring a refugee family with necessities for their new lives and continuing to visit them every week to build relationships. It looks like those gathered last Thursday to make dozens and dozens of sandwiches and snack bags for those who sleep on the blue and red line trains. It looks like taking a few hours out of your weekend to talk about how our congregation and community can become more anti-racist. It looks like acknowledging that our ministries are just as much about those on the margins as those who are firmly inside our walls today. It looks a lot like, taking up our cross and following the way of Jesus.

So friends, as we move into this week, I hope that Mark's turning point sticks with you. I hope you acknowledge the Peter that is within each of us. I pray that the gift of Christ's cross helps you look beyond your selfish ego to experience the gift of eternal life. May we know Christ's never-ending love for us, so that we might be empowered to take up our cross and follow Jesus. Amen.