

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for September 4, 2011 in Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Exodus 2:10-15 and Matthew 16:21-26

THANKFUL FOR THE DIFFERENCE

Poor Peter! One moment he soars; the very next, he crashes. Jesus had asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and Simon Peter had answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” for which Jesus had called him blessed and named him representative of the faith that would carry Jesus’ ministry forward. But the identification of Jesus as the one sent by God is not enough by itself. What does it mean for Jesus to be the Messiah? *How* will he be the Messiah, and what will be required of those who follow him?

The title Messiah (or Christ) – the Anointed One of God – does not define Jesus and his mission, because Jesus will not allow other people’s notions of what that title means to dictate his choices and the course he takes. At the time, there were various expectations tied to the promised coming of the Messiah. Probably the predominant hope was that he would drive out the hated Romans and establish Jerusalem as the new capital of an empire secured by the might of Israel’s God and governed by Torah, the biblical teaching and law. All nations and peoples would look to Jerusalem for benevolent peace, order, and wisdom rather than to pagan Rome for its brutally imposed “Roman Peace.” Jesus, however, would not let such nationalistic hopes chose his path. At the outset of his ministry, Jesus had rejected that Messianic crusade to power and glory as a temptation from Satan. So, when Peter speaks that temptation to him again, Jesus replies, “Get behind me, Satan!”

Jesus makes an amazing re-interpretation of what it means for him to be the Messiah and Son of God. His way is so radically different from the popular expectations that Peter is confounded. Jesus shocks him by making a 180-degree turn away from anything the disciple could have expected and been prepared to support. *What are you talking about, Jesus? You just said I got it right, and now you’re telling I’m terribly wrong! More than that, You’re telling me I recognized you as the Messiah, but Messiah means something I don’t recognize at all.*

For Jesus, being Son of God means sharing his Father’s compassion for this world’s people and longing for their redemption and healing and especially for the healing of life as a relational matter rather than a selfish, competitive matter. For him, to be fully and truly human is to love God wholeheartedly and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, and he extends

the definition of neighbor to include even our enemy. He has come to restore us to God and to each other and, thereby, to our rightful selves.

An article in the New York Times quoted a captured twenty-year-old Libyan soldier still loyal to Muammar el-Qaddafi as saying, “I myself would die a thousand times for Qaddafi even now. I love him because he gave us dignity, and he is a symbol for the patriotism of the country.” That’s almost Messianic-sounding, is it not? Looking at the two men themselves, who would compare them – Jesus and Qaddafi? The Libyan dictator has been ruthless and brutal toward his own people, but this young soldier has found in serving him a borrowed or shared pride that incorporates the brutality into his sense of honor. Do we not see similar borrowed and shared pride in street gangs? Do we not see it also in refined forms in financial power that tramples the competition and exploits its own workers? We’re told that some of the high-flying market managers called themselves “masters of the universe.” But over the centuries of church history, Christians and Christian nations have also been ruthless and brutal in the name of Jesus.

Like Peter, we need to recognize Jesus as utterly different in kind and purpose from the world’s powerful. He is not like Qaddafi, only much greater and on our side. He was not a new Caesar, only Jewish instead of Roman. For Jesus, being Messiah and Son of God meant he had suffer with and for the world’s suffering people. It meant he had to submit to humiliation with and for the shamed. It meant he had to die with all and for all who are doomed to die.

Jesus’ way of the cross is God’s way with humanity. The crucified Christ embodies God with us and for us. Christian preaching has often presented Jesus’ crucifixion as a momentary deviation, necessary for our sake but quickly overcome by Jesus’ return to power and glory. No. Self-giving, redemptive love is the power and glory of God. No wonder we, like Peter, have trouble understanding what it all means. Truly God’s ways are not like our ways, and our thoughts are not at all the same as God’s thoughts. This morning, I ask you to take Jesus’ chosen way of being God’s Messiah personally and to look with me for some very good reasons to be thankful that God’s ways are so much different from ours.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus replaced contempt with compassion. When the “normal” people turned away in disgust from lepers, sinners, tainted women, and the mentally ill, Jesus reached out his hand to touch, not only their bodies, but their minds and hearts. Where others enjoyed condemning the sinful and shameful, Jesus looked for openings to forgive and restore. What I’ve realized is that people who regard themselves as good and virtuous consider judgment to be truth. Sure, because Jesus had this habit of forgiving, the truth might have to be postponed until second chances have been exhausted and God is finally ready to close the books, but then, they think, judgment will provide truth.

For Jesus, judgment is not the truth that matters; it is not the goal. His parables of final judgment, like all biblical prophecy, are meant to change minds and hearts, not to predict inescapable doom. For Jesus, the truth that matters and so gives him his goal and purpose is God's redemptive love. God would take no pleasure in separating the saved from the lost – none. The thought of such finality is grievous. Truth is redemptive love.

So, let us be thankful:

- That God does not look upon us with contempt, not even when we mess up our lives, but sees and wants for us what we need for healing and wholeness.
- For the freedom Jesus gives us to be ourselves but ourselves loved, healed, restored, and enabled to go forward in trust and serve in freedom.
- That our faith is encouraged to question and grow, to be honest and real.
- That Jesus draws us together so life will not be selfish, mean, and lonely.
- That God does not hate us for being who we are.
- For not having to give up our minds to have our souls saved.
- That God's way is not tyranny of any kind.
- That we do not have to have enemies so we can feel good about ourselves.
- That no one is created to grovel in shame or strut in pride but, rather, that all of us are called to walk humbly with our God, respecting ourselves and each other.
- That God does not see us as winners and losers but as daughters and sons.
- That, yes, God hates the injustices and cruelties of this world but has chosen to suffer them with us and so lead us to a far better way of life together.
- That we do not have the right to give up on ourselves because God is not giving up on us.
- That we do not have the right to give up on each other, either, or write people off but can learn to see each other with God's eyes.
- That even when angry, God is not dismissive.
- That failure is not final. Look at Moses. Look at Simon Peter. When it feels as though God is gone or has forgotten us, God is still waiting and watching, calling us and hoping for our trust.

What does it benefit a person to attain greatness, even conquer to world in some sense, but lose his or her own soul – the very self that is most precious to God? Peter wanted Jesus to conquer and rule, and I suspect he wanted to share in the honor and glory of being on the winner's side, but Jesus had to follow a much different path for our sake. God wants us for sons and daughters, not subjects. What matters to God is how we turn out as people, not what heights we attain or benefits we accrue. For God, love is the truth that matters. Not power, not imposed order or standardized virtue, but love that makes life whole. Amen.