

Proverbs 1:20-33
Psalm 19
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

Proper 19B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Following Jesus

I have three questions for you this morning. They are big questions, questions you may even have asked of yourselves... I know I have.

Here you go:

1. What gives you the greatest joy in life?
2. What gives you your deepest sense of purpose?
3. When do you feel most authentically the person God created you to be?

Good. We'll come back to all of that later.

Jesus started his conversation this morning with questions too. The first one was easy - Who do people say that I am? That question only required reporting on what other people were saying. The second one? Not so easy - Who do YOU say that I am?

Who do you say Jesus is? If we call ourselves Christians, and Christians are followers of Jesus of Nazareth - then it seems pretty important to be clear on who it is we are following, whom we are trying to emulate, whose disciples WE are.

Peter, for once, came up with the answer Jesus was looking for from him - "You are the Messiah." But while Peter was right about Jesus' identity, he didn't seem to have any idea what that identity meant. So, Jesus began to teach them what it meant to be the Messiah. It meant suffering and death, and I'm pretty sure that wasn't what Peter thought he'd signed up for. I imagine Peter was thinking the Messiah, the anointed one, would be strong enough to overcome any evil or sickness or poverty or fear or heartache he, or anyone else, would encounter. I think that's the kind of Messiah a lot of us wish for. A God who will vanquish all sorrow and suffering, a God who will make the world peaceful, a God who will wipe out COVID, a God who will lovingly turn the minds and hearts of anyone who doesn't think the way we do or act the way we think they should act. But that's not the Messiah we got. The Messiah we got was profoundly vulnerable, and in the end surrendered everything - even his life.

Up until this point in Mark's gospel, nobody really knew the fullness of who Jesus was. He was always telling people to be quiet about the miracles, signs and wonders he made. Some said he was a prophet, some said John the Baptist come back to life, some even said Elijah. So, when Peter spoke those words - "You are the Messiah," everything changed. And when Jesus told them what it meant to be the Messiah, things changed for him too. This was his turning point, the moment he ceased teaching and preaching and healing in Galilee, the moment he turned his face toward Jerusalem and began to tell them of his future, and their own.

But Peter couldn't bear it. Of course, he loved Jesus and he couldn't stand the thought of Jesus dying without a fight... but it was more than that. Suffering and dying was not what he thought the Messiah was made for – the Messiah was made for greatness, for victory, for bringing God's Kingdom to bear. So, Peter rebuked Jesus, told him how wrong he was to say such things. Then Jesus did some pretty serious rebuking of his own – “Get behind me Satan.” Strong words for the vulnerable, loving Jesus. But the words that translate as “get behind me” are precisely the words Jesus used when he first called Peter. Get behind me, means “follow me.” Don't get caught up in worldly things. Remember what we're doing and follow me.

Jesus had been talking only with the twelve up to this point, but he must have realized this teaching was something everybody needed to hear. So, he called all the crowds to him and began teaching them about what it was to live the Christian life, what it was to be a disciple. They likely hoped for lots of good feelings and sharing the love and doing good works. But that wasn't what Jesus was teaching that day. As it turns out, once he'd been recognized as the Messiah, the first words out of his mouth were predictions of terrible suffering and giving up his life. Those very hard words couldn't have been what they expected to hear, and I don't imagine they were easy to hear. Those words aren't easy for us to hear either. But they are the words Jesus spoke.

And if Jesus was heading toward suffering and death, did that mean Peter had to head toward suffering and death too? After all, being a follower, a disciple, means we aspire to do what the one we follow, does. I think that's why Jesus talked about denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, losing our lives to save them. We've heard those words, but I wonder if we know what they mean?

When Jesus said those words, I don't think he was talking about giving up dessert or not going to parties or being only serious and grim and doing nothing that wasn't religious. I don't think the denial he spoke of, was giving up laughter or pleasure or joy and delight. I think what he was saying is that our lives are real. That we all suffer. That life can be very hard. And that putting our trust or faith or value in what we achieve, what we have, or in our importance compared to the people around us, will never give us joy or peace. Those things we think make us happy – lots of money or prestige or square footage or stuff – those things don't make us happy and they certainly don't offer the abundant life God wants for us.

Life isn't something we have or control or gain or even make. The whole “self-made human” ideal is utterly antithetical to what Jesus says matters. I don't necessarily think Jesus is saying it's wrong to be successful or to make lots of money. But I do think he's saying that these are not the things we should focus on or give our lives to. I think he is saying that abundant, joyful life comes in taking up our crosses, denying ourselves, losing our lives for his sake and for the sake of the good news, even if it's hard news. It's that paradoxical way Jesus always is. To have abundant life, he says, you have to give your life away. If you are my disciples, look at what I am about to do and do what I do. I am about to give my life away for the life of the world. And if that's what I do, as my disciples, that's what you're supposed to do too.

We know about this. We know about love this big. I remember watching my son with his newborn baby boy in his arms and tears in his eyes. I said to him “Now you know how I love

you...” There are people and maybe even ideals we would give our lives away for. It’s because of the love God has kindled in each one of us.

You see, taking up our crosses, denying ourselves, losing our lives isn’t something negative. It’s what we must do in order to live the abundant life God wants for us. Yes, there is heartache, yes there is suffering, yes there is profound difficulty. God knows that. God has experienced that. The very human, very divine Jesus lived and died that. But what the cross really points to is giving our lives away for the sake of love. It’s about understanding that in caring for others we have the real riches of life and that in giving of ourselves, we gain the Kingdom.

Giving our lives away for the sake of love is what Jesus is always talking about. Today is no different.

So... let’s go back to those questions I asked you a little earlier.

1. What gives you the greatest joy in life?
2. What gives you your deepest sense of purpose?
3. When do you feel most authentically the person God created you to be?

I’m guessing your answers don’t have much to do with your things or your importance or your bank accounts, with what you’ve mastered or amassed or attained. If your answers were anything like mine, they have to do with relationships, with loving and serving, with giving your life away for the sake of love. This is the way to the abundant life God wants for us, and as it turns out, you already knew that.

Sometimes we forget to ask the important questions. It is, I hope, one of the reasons we gather here each Sunday, to make a little space in the course of very busy lives to ponder the questions we would do well to spend our lives on. When Jesus asked his friends “Who do you say that I am?” I don’t think he was asking because he needed to know what people thought of him. I don’t think he was asking for his own benefit at all. I think he asked that question of his disciples then, just as he asks us now, for our benefit, because knowing who Jesus is changes our lives.

When we know who Jesus is for us, we’re set free from having to be what the world esteems and made free to live into the fullest sort of life imaginable. So, who do you say Jesus is?

I hope you’ll take some time, maybe even a lot of time to think about that and even to try to articulate it for yourself. Because when you do, something wonderful will happen for you. Not only will you come closer to Jesus, you’ll come closer to the truth of your own life, and the power of your life in the world.

Jesus walked the earth on feet just like ours. He healed people with hands just like ours. And he loved the whole wide world with a heart just like ours. To know Jesus is to know that we’re those feet and hands and hearts in the world now, and that the only way to spend our lives, is on love. Amen.