

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

At the start of the gospel of Mark the author states: ***The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*** Any reader or person who happens to hear this declaration might ask the question, “Who is this Jesus?” “What is this good news?” These are good questions to ask no matter how familiar you are with the story of Jesus or if you are just hearing the story for the first time. “Who is Jesus?” “What is the good news the author Mark intends?”

SLIDE: WHO IS JESUS?

If you have heard these questions before, do you think there are any new responses? Sometimes when we become very familiar with a subject or an organization or a person we stop being curious. You might say, “I went to college and completed my degree of study. I am done with learning.” Or you might say, “This is the way we have always done church. If it worked for us it can work for others.” Or you might say, “Oh, well that is the way he always is.” Or “she says the same every time.”

Sometimes we want life to be predictable. We want to be able to say we know how things are. The result of that is that we stop being curious. We make assumptions. We stop seeing possibilities. We cease to ask questions.

I remember this happened more than once in my first two calls to parish ministry. Individuals wanted me to declare that the meaning of a given passage of scripture was fixed and decided for all time. Some wanted me to agree with their own take on a verse or passage. They would say, “You’re the expert,” having come out of seminary. “Tell us what this means?” “My view is right, isn’t it, Pastor?” I must confess I did not feel much like an expert.

I was at once relieved and horrified when I noticed Carl, a nearby colleague who had been in parish ministry nearly 40 years, studying what was then the newest commentary on the gospel of Matthew. When I asked him why he was studying that he told me he thought there was more to discover on the gospel. I was temporarily relieved that I did not need to be the expert and then horrified when I

saw myself as holding this old view that a person could come to know all there was to know about a gospel.

SLIDE: CURIOSITY

When it comes to the Bible it is often the case that it confesses more than it understands and makes more claims than it ever explains. Today's lesson is a good example. We are meant to read it, chew on it, and let it inform our lives. We are meant to wonder and ask questions. We can look for how the Word functions in a particular text. Does the Word announce good news of Jesus? Does the Word tell us of our need of Christ? Are there some things we can say we are sure about? The surest things we can say from the scriptures are God creates, Jesus is Lord, and the Spirit advocates. As for the rest, we might do better to remain curious.

In today's portion of the story, Jesus asks questions. The easy question comes first, "What's the word on the street? Who do others say that I am?" Jesus is teasing out curiosity in his disciples. Then he asks them to go deeper and give their own confession of who he is. ***Who do you say that I am?***

As soon as Peter gives his remarkable answer, "'You are the Messiah,' that is, 'You are the Christ,'" Jesus orders Peter and the others to say nothing to anyone. We think Peter got it right and should be praised.

We think this answer is remarkable because we live on the other side of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and we know Jesus is the Crucified and Risen One, the Christ.

SLIDE: FOLLOW ME

But in the telling of the story by the Gospel writer Mark, this was not known, so caution is exhibited. Jesus did not want this description associated with himself, yet. When Peter hears Jesus say, "I must die, I must be crucified," he strongly resists, perhaps because his idea of Messiah was one of power and force, not vulnerability. Then in the face of Peter's resistance Jesus speaks of paradox and invitation. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." It is at this point that Jesus provides a correction to their imaginations. He does not wish to take the world by force, but by a following.

Who Jesus is cannot be fully known at this point in the story. Yet Jesus does invite the disciples into where the kingdom way is going. ***If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*** And more than that, Jesus invites anyone to join the movement.

Jesus asks us to commit ourselves to The One we know and understand only in part along a path that is filled with hostilities yet ultimately leading to new life. We are called to live in the midst of paradox. How can one deny self and still have life? How can one take up the cross and survive?

SLIDE: PARKER PALMER QUOTE

Parker Palmer invites people to live within paradoxes as a way of discovering new life. A Quaker by faith, he writes about how to become a more true self, helping people be more confident in their being so that they can struggle with the complexities of life and gain clarity about how to proceed through life. He invites people to live within paradoxes to discover this.

“The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring: these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings.” I think this is what he means - If we refuse to hold them, costly as they are, hoping that we will be spared of doubt, despair, and pain, the result is living without faith, hope, and love. Here Palmer’s thought comes close to what we find in the Christian faith.

SLIDE: CROSS AND QUOTE

I used to wonder about getting all of this right, like how to deny myself. What is this about? Is this a self-improvement project? Maybe it means to spend less now and save so you can have more at a later day. Deny yourself by delaying gratification, is that what it means? I don’t think this is what Jesus means. Does it mean to not have much of a personality or to never be assertive? My way into this text came after I had spent some time following.

I was following by heeding the Spirit’s nudge by being faithful in worship as a young person, as a pastor by becoming a good colleague, and then by taking advantage of continuing education. I did not know at the time I was doing all of

this what the results would be. I was just doing what I thought needed to be done.

Walter Bruggemann writes that the task and goal of worship, accompanied by education and pastoral care, is to move our lives from the dominant version of reality to the sub-version of reality. He speaks about all the things the world counts on, coercion, power, all forms of violence, will be subverted by the work of the Spirit. If we only judge life by the view of the dominant version, life in the sub-version is vulnerable and foolish and exposed. But in the end the sub-version will not be judged by the dominant. In the end, it is judged by the truth of the gospel, by the reality of God whom we attest, and by the truth of our lives in the image of that God. The truth of our lives takes shape in the following.

Long ago Jesus asked Peter and the disciples to commit themselves to follow him not knowing all the struggles ahead but with the promise that the good news would have its day. Today Jesus asks us to commit ourselves to The One we know and understand only in part along a path that is filled with hostilities yet ultimately leading to new life.

Bruggemann's thought rings true, "we are endlessly seduced out of the truth of the gospel, so we return to again to worship to recite and receive this sub-version (the grace of this One) who is the truth of our life and the truth of this world.

Thanks be to God.

May the peace which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.