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Mark 8:27-38

In the gospel of Mark, the disciples are usually clueless. They are like bumbling side-kicks of some super hero. What's funny is that we readers always know what is happening. Mark starts, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (*Mk 1:1*) Right off the bat, we're told that Jesus is the Christ (or the Messiah), as well as the Son of God. But, page after page, the disciples are amazed and confused by Jesus. They ask, "Who is this?" (*4:41*)

That's part of why it's so exciting to hear Peter get it right for once. Jesus pins the disciples down and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" (*8:29*) And Peter has finally figured it out! He confesses, "You are the Messiah." (*8:29*) You are the one who we have been waiting for!

Jews waited for a messiah who was an eschatological king – a perfect king who would take over and reign. Under his rule, Israel would be delivered from its enemies and there would be peace forevermore. As 21st century Christians, we blend the idea of Jewish Messiah with a couple other scriptural figures – Isaiah's suffering servant and the Son of Man from several of the Hebrew prophets. We understand Jesus to be a blending of all three. But these were three different

concepts in the Jewish tradition at the time. When Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah, he is thinking of one thing: Jesus is this king, ruling with power and glory. And Jesus knew exactly what Peter meant.

So “... he began to teach them...” (8:31) and Jesus turns the disciples’ worlds upside down. It’s the first time in Mark that he speaks plainly of the passion that would come. He would suffer, be rejected, and die. And then rise again! The disciples expected a totally different forecast. Can you imagine their shock?

Peter responds in a natural way. Jesus is the Messiah, right? The king of all kings. There’s no way that such horrors could happen to Jesus. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Jesus’ harsh response, “Get behind me, Satan!” is clear. Peter may have gotten the right answer on the first question. But he does not yet understand what Messiah means. He can’t imagine how Jesus fits into God’s loving plan for the world. Jesus even tries to explain what will happen, but Peter can not hear the truth. His own hopes and dreams for him were too strong

Jesus had to correct and instruct them. And not only so they would know what to expect. For Peter and the others to follow Jesus, they needed to see him for what he was. They had to leave behind their expectations. In this passage, Jesus’ foretelling of his passion strips them of their hopes and visions for him. He tells

them what God's will is for Jesus' earthly life – to suffer, to be rejected, to die, and to rise again. He forces them to face the truth of God's vision for his life.

Seeing Jesus truly is essential for the disciples to understand what it means to follow him. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (8:34)

Denying themselves makes it sound like there is a death. We first think it is a death of precious personality or uniqueness. A death of what makes each person special in God's sight. Why would this make any sense?

The denial that Jesus speaks of is not denying who the disciples – and we – are at their cores. It is denying the false expectations that we have for our lives. The visions that our families or our jobs impose on us. The hopes that our economy demands of us. The pressures from our greater culture.

Denying these false projections is to see ourselves as we really are: Blessed by the gifts and love of their creators. It is to leave behind inflated egos or paralyzing senses of inadequacy. We look ourselves in the mirror, with our beauty and blemishes. And we can embrace the blessed and unique humanity in us. We need to deny so much in order to see ourselves as God does.

Jesus says not only to deny ourselves, but to take up our crosses and follow. He does not say that we should die on a cross – that is God’s will for him alone. No, we are to take up our crosses. Just like Jesus, and like a criminal, carrying our guilt on our backs. Taking up our crosses means living with humility and forgiveness. This comes from knowing who we are, our sins and our weaknesses, our joys and our gifts. Taking up our crosses means living into God’s will for our lives. Not trying to live into the hopes or the dreams of others.

Denying ourselves and taking up our crosses changes us. In it, we make space for God’s deep forgiveness for all that we lack. In it, we also remember how our loving creator made us. Blessing us with gifts. Preparing us for a life of ministry. Willing that wonder and life may emerge from our days of sin and death.

When we have shed our false selves. When we have released the visions that don’t fit. When we have taken up our cross of humility. Only then can we discern what God would will for our lives. Only then can we follow our deepest joy and participate in God’s love for the world around us. Only then can we embrace the unglamorous, unromantic ministry that God has waiting for each of us. When we let go of the lives that we think we want – that is when we can gain the fullness of life that could only be a blessing from God.

With the disciples, we see Jesus as a suffering Son of God, given to the world. That difficult act helps us see ourselves as broken, blessed people, whom God also gives to the world. None of this is easy. But what a gift for us all.