

## Proper 19 (24)

September 13, 2009

*Readings:*

[Wisdom of Solomon 7:26 - 8:1](#)) [Proverbs 1:20-33](#) or [Mark 8:27-38](#)

Sermon by Susi Kawolics

When I hear this gospel story, my first reaction is – “Oh that poor Peter” Not only is he rebuked by Jesus in front of the disciples, but his missteps are recorded in the gospels for all the world to know. It takes Peter a long time to really come to understand who Jesus is, and we are all privy to each blundering step along the way.

I have to say, I’m glad my faith story is not as public as Peter’s. It would be rather embarrassing to have all my wrong answers and all my mistakes published in the best selling book of all time. Any of us who have ever struggled with our faith, who have worked towards knowing God better through the person of Jesus have probably changed and grown in our beliefs along the way. It is often by discovering what does not ring true that we discover what is true. It is in discovering who Jesus is not that we get to know who Jesus is.

So can we really fault Peter for his response to Jesus’ statement about his suffering and death? He has only his experience to go on. And here’s what he has seen up this point in the gospel. He has seen Jesus preach, seen crowds of people gather around him, seen disciples respond to his call disciples and follow him without looking back. He has seen Jesus heal people the lepers, the lame, the blind, even his own mother-in-law. He has seen the casting out of demons, the miraculous feeding to 5000, and the walking on water. Based on all this, when Jesus asks Peter, “Who do you say that I am?,” Peter answers, probably in awe, “You are the Messiah.”

This was a term very familiar to the Jewish people. The title of Messiah was used in their scriptures and in their history to describe a leader anointed by God. It had been applied to the Hebrew Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. They were anointed by God in their roles of King, as military, political leaders, defeating the enemies of the Jewish people.

So when Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah, he is thinking of Jesus as the anointed king who will free the Jewish people from oppression of the Romans. Peter is thinking of freedom as political freedom, rather than freedom from sins. He is thinking of Jesus’ power as political power, rather than spiritual power.

When Peter uses the title “Messiah” to identify Jesus, Jesus wants to make sure that Peter understands what he’s saying. He does not say that Peter is wrong in calling him Messiah, only that he should not tell anyone what he has just said. With the Jewish understanding of word Messiah, spreading the word that Jesus is the Messiah would mean spreading a misconception. Jesus does not want his followers believing that he is going to lead the Jewish people in a military revolt against the Roman government, that they will gain power, and that they will have it made.

On the contrary, Jesus wants to make sure that all his followers know that his path is not an easy one. Anyone who thinks that following Jesus will mean a life devoid of

suffering is sorely mistaken. He makes it very clear that he will *not* save them from suffering, in fact, they will probably suffer more because of following him.

But Peter does not want to hear this. When he hears Jesus say to them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, he protests, loudly. This prediction of Jesus' flies directly in the face of Peter's beliefs, and his hopes. It changes everything. Then Jesus goes on to say that if any want to become his followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. No wonder Peter doesn't want to believe it.

This discourse that took place 2000 years ago is still taking place today. It is we, in our daily lives, who are being asked by Jesus "Who do you say that I am?" And the answer to that reveals a lot about our faith, about what we expect from following Jesus, about how we live our lives.

There are plenty who want to believe, like Peter did, that Jesus is Messiah, in the same way Peter understood that title. They believe that Jesus will save them from all suffering, and that by following him, everything will be all right. Others believe that God wants Christians to be financially rich, therefore, poor believers are doing something wrong, which blocks them from God's financial blessings. This kind of prosperity theology assures people that God promises to make them healthy and wealthy, if only they will possess and demonstrate adequate faith. Many believe that if they pray enough, God will remove all trials from their lives.

Today's reading denounces such ideas. Jesus does not say that following him will lead to any material benefit, or to a life without suffering. Most of us know the truth of this our own life experiences. Jesus makes it very clear that just because we suffer, or because everything is not perfect in our family, or because our church community is going through a difficult time, it does *not* mean that we are not following him. It does not mean that we do not have enough faith.

Jesus calls us, not to work hard to gain wealth in our lives, but to work hard to lose our lives in service to others. When he talks about losing our lives, he means we are asked to die little deaths along the way, to give away parts of ourselves. When we give anything – our time, talent, treasures – a kind word, a prayer, a meal, a listening ear to anyone in need, we are losing our lives. When we stand up for what the gospel teaches against the world's values, we are losing our lives. When we act in a way that shows someone else's needs are more important than our own, we are losing our lives.

Peter finally learned who Jesus really was, and what it meant for him to be a follower. In the end, he lost his life in a big way, as a martyr under the Roman ruler Nero. But it took Peter a long time, and many mistakes and betrayals along the way to finally figure it out. He had to let go of his pre-conceived ideas, of who he wanted Jesus to be, and embrace the person Jesus actually was.

This reading about Jesus asking "Who do you say that I am?" comes just after a healing story. Jesus has just cured a blind man. This miracle is unique in that the man is not immediately healed of all his blindness. The story tells of Jesus taking the blind man and after spitting on his eyes and laying his hands on him, asking, "Do you see anything?" The man looks up and says, "I see men, but I see them like trees, walking

around." Then again Jesus lays his hands on his eyes; and the man looks intently and his sight is restored.

This is how it is in our lives. We begin to know Jesus, to follow him, like the disciples did. But just like in any good relationship, we don't know everything right from the beginning. We learn gradually, we keep learning as we walk along. We see Jesus just dully at first, like the blind man saw people, but as we continue to be with Jesus, our vision becomes clearer.

This is why I love the reading from the Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon. They speak to me of continuous searching, of always learning. Wisdom, God's wisdom cries out in the street, in the squares, and at the entrance of the city gates. This voice of God is still speaking to us today. God invites us to listen to it, open ourselves up to it, to grow in our understanding. Just like Peter had to grow in his understanding of who Jesus was, and how he was to follow Jesus, so must we.

Here is what I take from this gospel story. First of all, that like Peter, we may not know everything. God's still-speaking voice cries out to us as the voice of wisdom. We are called to open, to listen, to not cling so tightly to what we believe is the truth that we miss the actual truth.

Following Jesus means more than just letting go of false ideas about him. It also means letting go of our lives – Jesus calls it losing our lives. We let go of our resources to help others, of our time to help others, of our talents to help others. Those who say you will only gain and never suffer are not listening to the voice of Jesus.

That being said, however, even though we may suffer, we are not alone during our suffering. Jesus is with us, in our lives, our families, our church community. Because he himself suffered, he understands and knows our suffering, and never abandons us. Jesus did not predict his suffering and death only, he also predicted his resurrection. This full story promises that suffering and death will not have the final word. We put our hope in the promise that in the end – life will prevail over death, and light over darkness.

Let us pray:

Jesus, Messiah and suffering one – may we lose our lives for your sake, yet always remember that you are with us at every moment of our lives. Lead us to the truth about who you are, and to belief that your light will overcome any and all darkness. Amen.