



The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 16, 2018

His Story and Our Stories

MARK 8: 27-38

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

SERMON

HOW MANY OF YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH GOLDEN BOOKS? FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1942, THEY SOLD FOR TWENTY-FIVE CENTS EACH. *THE POKY LITTLE PUPPY* WAS THEIR FIRST ORIGINAL STORY.

A STORY PASSED DOWN IN MY FAMILY SPEAKS OF MY LOVE OF GOLDEN BOOKS.



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I WOULD NOT GO TO SLEEP UNLESS I HAD MY TWENTY-SEVEN GOLDEN BOOKS IN BED WITH ME. WE HAD A RITUAL OF PLACING THEM AROUND ME BEFORE SAYING PRAYERS AND SAYING GOOD NIGHT.

IN THINKING ABOUT THIS AS AN ADULT, THESE GOLDEN BOOKS SERVED AS A KIND OF SECURITY BLANKET. WHICH RAISES THE QUESTION "WAS I ALREADY SEARCHING FOR KNOWLEDGE THAT MIGHT HELP ME FIGURE THINGS OUT?" IF KNOWLEDGE IS POWER, WAS I ALREADY, IN MY CHILD-LIKE WAY, FEELING BOTH VULNERABLE AND ON THE SEARCH FOR STORIES WITH MEANING AND PURPOSE?

IN SOME WAY, ALL WE HAVE ARE OUR STORIES AND THE MEANING THEY HOLD FOR US. BOTH IN OUR LIVES AND IN OUR FAITH COMMUNITY.

OUR NEW TESTAMENT STORIES ABOUT JESUS WERE FIRST **SPOKEN** WITHIN A FAITH COMMUNITY, LIKE OURS. THEY WERE NOT WRITTEN DOWN. THUS, THE REFORMATION EMPHASIS ON PREACHING AND HEARING THE WORD OF GOD....

ONE OF MY SEMINARY PROFESSORS IMAGINES IT THIS WAY:

AFTER JESUS, THERE ARE HOUSE CHURCHES. SMALL COMMUNITIES OF BELIEVERS WHO GATHER TOGETHER FOR WORSHIP, A SHARED MEAL, AND THE LORD'S SUPPER.

THE FIRST FOLLOWERS OF JESUS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES OF BEING WITH JESUS.

SOMEONE IN ONE FAITH COMMUNITY IS ILL, SO ONE OF THE DISCIPLES RECALLS A HEALING HE WITNESSED.

THERE IS A POLITICAL ISSUE, SO SOMEONE RECALLS WHAT JESUS SAID ABOUT RENDERING TO GOD WHAT IS GOD'S AND TO CAESAR'S WHAT IS CAESAR'S.

DURING A SEASON OF HARVEST, ONE OF HIS FIRST FOLLOWERS RECALLS JESUS' PARABLES ABOUT SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD.



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EVENTUALLY, THOUGH, THESE FIRST FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ARE APPROACHING DEATH AND IT BECOMES NECESSARY TO WRITE DOWN THE STORIES SO THEY ARE NOT LOST. MARK, THE FIRST GOSPEL, WAS LIKELY WRITTEN ABOUT FIFTY YEARS AFTER JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION.

NUMEROUS COMMUNITIES OF FAITH SPRANG UP, EACH FOLLOWING THEIR OWN ORAL TRADITION. WE ALL ARE AWARE OF THE FOUR COMMUNITIES OF FAITH DESIGNATED BY MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE, AND JOHN.

BUT, WE NOW KNOW THROUGH ARCHEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES, SUCH AS THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS, THAT THERE WERE MANY OTHER FAITH COMMUNITIES WITH DIFFERENT STORIES ABOUT JESUS.

THE GOSPEL OF PETER, THE GOSPEL OF MARY, THE GOSPEL OF BARNABAS, THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS, AND, MOST FAMOUSLY, THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS.

HERE'S A SHORT STORY FOR YOU: AS THE CHURCH BEGAN TO EXPERIENCE THAT JESUS WAS NOT RETURNING ANY TIME SOON, THE LEADERS FELT IT NECESSARY TO CONSOLIDATE AND UNIFY THE STORIES ABOUT JESUS BY CHOOSING JUST FOUR GOSPELS THAT SEEMED MOST AUTHENTIC.

MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE WERE QUICKLY CHOSEN BECAUSE OF SIMILARITY OF OUTLINE AND CONTENT. IT CAME DOWN, THEN, TO A CHOICE BETWEEN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN AND THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS. SUPPORTERS OF EACH BATTLED IT OUT WITH, OF COURSE, JOHN WINNING. BUT ISN'T IT INTERESTING THAT JOHN'S GOSPEL IS THE ONLY GOSPEL TO HAVE NEGATIVE STORIES ABOUT THOMAS? FOREVER TAGGING HIM AS THE "DOUBTING DISCIPLE." JUST GOES TO SHOW THAT CHURCH FIGHTS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DOWN AND DIRTY.

THOMAS PRESENTS A MORE PSYCHOLOGICAL JESUS:

JESUS SAYS, "WHEN YOU COME TO KNOW YOURSELVES, THEN YOU WILL BE KNOWN, AND YOU WILL REALIZE THAT YOU ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE LIVING FATHER. BUT IF YOU DO NOT COME TO KNOW YOURSELVES, THEN YOU EXIST IN POVERTY, AND YOU ARE POVERTY."

THE DISCIPLES SAID TO JESUS: "TELL US HOW OUR END WILL BE." JESUS SAID: "HAVE YOU ALREADY DISCOVERED THE BEGINNING THAT YOU ARE NOW ASKING ABOUT THE END? FOR WHERE THE BEGINNING IS, THERE THE END WILL BE, TOO. BLESSED IS HE WHO WILL STAND AT THE BEGINNING. AND HE WILL KNOW THE END, AND HE WILL NOT TASTE DEATH."

JESUS SAID: "SPLIT WOOD, I AM THERE. LIFT UP A ROCK, YOU WILL FIND ME THERE."



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SO THE STORIES WE CHOOSE AND THE MEANING WE ASSIGN THEM CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD.

FOR EXAMPLE, A MONK SITS TEDIOSLY TRANSLATING AN ANCIENT MANUSCRIPT FROM GREEK TO ENGLISH. SUDDENLY, THE WHOLE MONASTERY IS FILLED WITH HIS CRIES OF ANGUISH.

THE OTHER MONKS COME RUSHING INTO THE LIBRARY, ONLY TO FIND THE MONK HOLDING HIS HEAD IN HIS HANDS.

“BROTHER,” THEY INQUIRE, “WHAT CAN BE SO WRONG?”

THE MONK SHAKES HIS HEAD, “IT SAYS CELEBRATE, NOT CELIBATE....”

THIS MORNING WE ARE HIGHLIGHTING OUR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS WITH “BLESSING OUR CHILDREN” SUNDAY.

OUR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN ARE ESSENTIAL. IT IS THE MEANS BY WHICH WE PUT THE BIBLE STORIES INTO OUR CHILDREN’S HEARTS AND MINDS. AND WE IMPROVED OUR CURRICULUM THIS FALL TO INCLUDE RESOURCES TO HELP PARENTS REINFORCE THE STORIES AT HOME WITH THEIR CHILDREN.

THE TRICKY, BUT CRITICAL TASK IS TO GET THE WHOLE STORY PUT INTO OUR CHILDREN AND INTO US.

TAKE THIS MORNING’S GOSPEL. MUCH OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY STOPS WITH THE FIRST PART OF THIS STORY, AT THE MOMENT PETER DECLARES JESUS TO BE THE MESSIAH.

AND THEN RUN OFF AND BEGIN TO BUILD HUMAN CONSTRUCTS OUT OF PETER’S DECLARATION: JESUS IS THE MESSIAH AND LORD AND KING. AND, IF HE IS MESSIAH AND KING, THEN HE RULES OVER ALL AND THE NAME OF JESUS HAS POWER AND JUST ASK JESUS FOR WHATEVER YOU NEED. THE LORD OF THE UNIVERSE WANTS TO BLESS YOU. AND THERE’S A PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE THAT IS GLORIOUS, CREATED BY THE MESSIAH HIMSELF.

BUT THAT’S NOT THE BIBLICAL STORY. AND, WITHOUT THE WHOLE STORY, WE ARE MISLED ABOUT THE NATURE OF REALITY. WHICH IS WHY JESUS CAME. TO TELL US HOW THINGS REALLY ARE.



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AS THE STORY CONTINUES, JESUS MUDDIES THE NOTION OF MESSIAH BY CALLING HIMSELF *SON OF MAN*. THAT'S WHY I HAVE PREACHED TO YOU ABOUT THE MEANING OF THE SON OF MAN. AND WILL AGAIN.

AND THEN JESUS SAYS HE HAS TO SUFFER MANY THINGS.

SOME OF US, LIKE PETER, HAVE TROUBLE HEARING OR ACCEPTING THIS. WE'D RATHER HAVE SOME STORIES ABOUT BLESSINGS AND HEAVENLY STREETS OF GOLD.

JESUS USES THE WORD "SATAN," MEANING *ADVERSARY*, TO DESCRIBE PETER. MEANING THERE IS AN ADVERSARY IN EACH ONE OF US THAT OPPOSES THE WORD OF GOD IN JESUS. WE HAVE TO WATCH THAT PART OF OURSELVES. WE CONSTANTLY ARE IN THE NEED OF BEING CONVERTED TO THE WAYS OF JESUS.

JESUS FLESHES OUT THE STORY: ANY OF US WHO WANT TO FOLLOW JESUS MUST DENY OURSELVES, MEANING WE LEARN HOW TO SET ASIDE THE SELF-CENTERED DEMANDS OF OUR EGO. WE TAKE UP OUR CROSS, THAT IS, LEARN HOW TO CARRY OUR OWN SUFFERINGS GRACEFULLY AND HUMBLY WHEN THEY FALL ON US. AND THEY WILL FALL ON US. AND THEN FOLLOW JESUS WITH OUR CROSS TO WHEREVER IT LEADS IN OUR OWN LIFE.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST HAPPENS ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE TO EVERYONE.

THIS IS EVIDENT IN OUR GOSPEL TEACHING. JESUS CONNECTS THE PATH HE WILL FOLLOW IN HIS OWN SUFFERINGS TO THE PATH WE FOLLOW IN OUR OWN SUFFERINGS....

IF WE ACCEPT THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS AS GOSPEL TRUTH. JESUS MAKES IT CLEAR THAT NOT EVERYONE IS ABLE TO HEAR WHAT HE HAS TO SAY.

IN EVERY FAITH COMMUNITY THERE IS TENSION BETWEEN THOSE WHO GET IT AND THOSE WHO DON'T. WE ARE ALL ON A CONTINUUM BETWEEN ACCEPTING AND REJECTING THE LIVING WORD OF GOD AMONG US....



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IT IS SO IMPORTANT THAT THE WHOLE CYCLE OF THE STORY OF JESUS AND HIS TEACHINGS GETS PUT INTO OUR CHILDREN AND THAT WE CONTINUE TO REFLECT ON THESE STORIES AS ADULTS. BECAUSE THE MEANING OF THE STORIES CHANGE AS WE GATHER UP OUR OWN LIFE EXPERIENCE.

LET'S TAKE A SIMPLE EXAMPLE.

IT'S IMPORTANT THAT OUR CHILDREN LEARN THE BEATITUDES. IN SOME WAY, THESE ARE JESUS' NEW COMMANDMENTS, BUILDING ON AND SUPERCEDING THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

AND ONE OF THE BEATITUDES IS "BLESSED ARE THE MEEK FOR THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH."

WHEN FIRST LEARNING THIS BEATITUDE, WE MIGHT PUT INTO OUR CHILDREN NOTIONS OF BEING KIND AND GENTLE. WHICH IS NOT A BAD THING.

BUT THEN, AS ADULTS, IT IS IMPORTANT TO BUILD ON WHAT WAS FIRST PUT INTO US AND CONTINUE TO LEARN. AND THEN DISCOVER THAT THE WORD JESUS USES FOR *MEEK* COMES FROM THE SAME GREEK WORD FOR *DYNAMITE*.

THAT WHAT JESUS IS REALLY SAYING IS SOMETHING LIKE "BUILD UP YOURSELF SO THAT YOU CAN KNOCK THAT OBNOXIOUS GUY INTO LAST WEEK, BUT CHOOSE NOT TO DO IT." RATHER THAN JESUS SAYING THAT WE ARE TO BE WELCOME MATS TO EVERY LOUD, NASTY VOICE THAT COMES ALONG, HE IS ACTUALLY SAYING "BUILD YOURSELF UP SO THAT YOU HAVE A SENSE OF MASTERY AND POWER. BUT THEN MANAGE YOUR STRENGTH."

FURTHER, IF WE PUT THE WHOLE STORY INTO OUR CHILDREN AND CONTINUE TO HEAR THE WHOLE STORY OURSELVES AS ADULTS, THEN WE INTEGRATE THE PRIMARY SYMBOL OF THE CROSS.

THE SUFFERING GOD/MAN JESUS NAILED TO HIS OWN EXISTENCE.

AND IF WE INTEGRATE THE ENTIRE STORY, THEN WE HAVE A CHANCE TO GRACEFULLY AND HUMBLY ACCEPT OUR OWN SUFFERINGS. AND FIND THEIR PURPOSE AND MEANING IN OUR LIVES.

WE LEARN THAT LIFE IS NOT FAIR.

THAT NOT ALL STORIES HAVE HAPPY ENDINGS.



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THAT THE FATHER DOES NOT RESCUE THE SON FROM HIS SUFFERINGS NOR DOES THE FATHER RESCUE US.

THAT, PARADOXICALLY, OUR SUFFERING ACTUALLY BRINGS US CLOSER TO A LIVING EXPERIENCE OF THE DIVINE.

THAT SUFFERING DOES NOT HAVE TO DO WITH BAD LUCK, PUNISHMENT, THE WORLD BEING AGAINST US, OR BEING DEALT A BAD HAND.

WE MAY EVEN FINALLY HEAR IN THE WORDS OF INSTITUTION "ON THE NIGHT IN WHICH HE WAS BETRAYED" THAT THE BETRAYALS WE EXPERIENCE IN LIFE ARE JUST PART OF EVERY LIFE. AND THAT BETRAYALS LEAD US TO FINDING OUT WHO WE REALLY ARE, EVEN AS JESUS REVEALS WHO HE IS WHEN JUDAS BETRAYS HIM.

THE GOAL OF TEACHING OUR CHILDREN THE WHOLE STORY IS SO, AS THEY GROW UP, THEY CAN CONNECT THE STORIES OF THEIR LIVES WITH THE STORIES OF JESUS.

I THINK OF MY LITTLE SELF SURROUNDED WITH MY GOLDEN BOOKS, MY SECURITY BLANKET.

ALL OF US HAVE TO FIGHT THE DESIRE TO STAY SAFELY UNDER THE BLANKETS AND NOT GET OUT OF BED. IT REALLY IS AN ACT OF COURAGE TO PUT OUR FEET ON THE FLOOR EACH MORNING AND HEAD OUT INTO OUR DAY.

BECAUSE, ONCE AWAKE, WE HAVE TO WRESTLE WITH THE ANXIETIES OF LIFE, ONCE MORE CARRY OUR SUFFERINGS, ONCE AGAIN COMBAT THE ADVERSARY, AND REDISCOVER OUR PATH IN LIFE.

THESE STORIES OF JESUS, ILLUMINATING THE STORIES OF EACH OF OUR LIVES, HOLD US, ENLIVEN US, EMPOWER US, AND SHOW EACH OF US OUR WAY.

SERMON SONG

THE RAINBOW CONNECTION BY KERMIT