

Well, who do we have here? And what difference does it make?

Mark 8:27-38

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*27 And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" 28 And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets." 29 And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." 30 And he charged them to tell no one about him. 31 And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." 34 And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. 36 For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? 37 For what can a man give in return for his life? 38 For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

You've gone to see him at a great leadership conference. You've paid big bucks to hear him talk, to get motivated, to sit with hundreds of others as they too are motivated. And you aren't disappointed. As he speaks, you start to resonate with what he has said. You know he's been successful, more successful than anyone could imagine, and you start hearing him talk about why he's been successful, and you say to yourself: "hey, I can do that. I'm sure that I can."

And then suddenly he stops. He scans the audience. And then his eyes rest on you. He says to the audience: "Excuse me, just a moment."

He comes down from the podium. A murmur runs through the crowd: "What's he doing? What's wrong?"

He starts over towards the section that you are sitting in. And then he works his way right to where you are sitting. He stands right in front of you. You automatically stand up as a sign of honour. And then Bill Gates asks you a question: "My friend, what would you like me to do for you?"

And you? You are speechless. You have no idea what to say. The richest man in the world is standing in front of you, asking you what you would like him to do for you, and you say...?

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As we heard last week, it was not the multiplication of bread and loaves by Jesus so that 5000 men, plus women and children, could eat that so astounded Jesus' disciples. Who knows, people said, maybe there

was more bread there than at first glance we thought there was and Jesus got people to share. Maybe it was magic.

No, the disciples were not really overwhelmed by who Jesus was until their own lives were at risk. When they were almost overwhelmed by the great storm on the sea and Jesus came to them across the waters, got into the boat, and calmed the storm... then they knew that this one who was with them in the boat was much more than they had ever realized. In fact, so much greater was He, that they were left absolutely speechless and agog:

“Surely this could not be. The Lord, through whom creation itself had come to be, who had overseen all of space and time for thousands, perhaps millions, perhaps billions of years, in the boat with us, now? It would indeed explain how he was able to multiply bread and fishes: He’s the Creator. But, come on: that’s nonsense. How could they even begin to believe that this same Lord was there in the boat with us?”

But, we believe that he did. He came right down there and got in the boat with them. He didn’t need to ask them what they wanted Him to do: it was written all over their faces: “Save us!”

Can we believe that He is in the same boat here with us this morning? That He has come right down into the boat with us now and stands here and that He is asking us – because it probably isn’t written all over our faces though maybe it’s written in our hearts – “ what do you want me to do for you”.

Our minds balk at this, philosophically and theologically. How could the God of all creation, the God of all space and time, fit within that boat? How could He fit within the shape of a man? No, this is too absurd even to contemplate.

And our hearts do to: why? Why would God – and I know this sounds ridiculous even as I say it – but why would the God of all creation, the God of all space and time, even bother to come across the waters and sit in that little boat, tossed on that little insignificant Sea of Galilee? Why would He be here this morning, asking us gathered here: what shall I do for you, Kanata CRC?

What the followers of Jesus experienced in that boat those years ago was the start of wisdom. And perhaps for the first time in their lives, they were able to be freed from asking questions about daily survival to asking questions about what really matters in life.

Because when Jesus calmed the storm and got into the boat, it finally dawned on the disciples who they might be dealing with and they were awed.

And from that point on they started to learn that the important actions in their lives were going to be shaped by two principles:

- Be humble
- Be bold

Sounds like a contradiction, doesn’t it. It’s not.

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## Be humble

In Jesus' day, a man's role was to be anything but humble. It was epitomized on the field of battle, when heroes shouted out their glories to the opposing troops and outdid one another in their boasts.

Women, on the other hand, were expected to be subservient and learn. They were expected to listen, to be attentive.

Today, in our culture of scientific knowledge, feminists have tried to turn the tables and give women a more active, outspoken, public role.

But, in the Christian context, turning the tables was actually supposed to be the other way around, or better said, mutually turning the tables. Because, for Jesus, it was the men in the boat, not the women on the shore, who had to change most. They had to learn that they did not know everything, that they could not boast of their knowledge. They had to become like women – and little children – and be willing to be attentive and learn. Think of Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus.

And, once they had learned, then both men and women – and even little children – could become teachers.

But, beware becoming a teacher or leader too quickly. Peter became a leader, the leader, in the church, but not at the beginning, not when he tried to reprimand his own Lord, thinking even after what he had experienced in the boat that he knew more than Jesus.

When Jesus was in the boat with them, the disciples were in awe, but they still needed to learn much. Peter, who was in boat, tried to reprimand Jesus, whom Peter had still not seen in all His fullness, but only just as Messiah or Christ, that is, God's designated leader to make Israel what it is supposed to be. He is that, but He's also much more than that, and Peter hadn't gotten the full picture yet. Peter certainly hadn't seen that the drama that he had just an inkling of in the boat would reach its fullest and most horrible climax as the Lord of glory, the Lord of all space and time, the one on whom our whole reality depends, was to be executed on a cross. So Jesus turned and said to Peter: "You are my adversary, Peter, that is, a Satan to me. You cannot be on the side of what I, the Son of God, am doing if you persist. So get behind me and listen to me well."

You know that I'm a teacher, right? In fact, I am a doctor of theology. Ridiculous isn't it? For who can understand the things that we are talking about here, things that are too deep for human understanding, things that are far greater and deeper "than we can ask or imagine"?

I am comforted by one thing. That the greatest teachers of all time have been those who realized how little they understood, just as the greatest saints have been those who realized how inadequate they were to the tasks before them. It is not teachers who exalt in their knowledge who get it and are able to communicate it to others, but rather those who are humble before the face of the unknown and in some cases, the unknowable. Why? Because they have understood the difference between knowledge and wisdom: knowledge is about being in control; wisdom is about wonder of things beyond our knowing. The best scientists, the best writers, the best theologians are not those who have dominated their domains, but who, like pioneers and explorers have ventured into the unknown with a sense of awe and wonder.

*I see being humble most clearly in warnings in early church writings against seeking leadership. Think of the letter of James: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”*

You can tell a person who is not wise: he is not willing to listen. He is anxious to become a leader, be it a teacher, or an elder, a pastor, or a bishop to control, to lead. From the earliest days, church tradition has warned us about those who are anxious to lead. In fact, again and again, we are shown pictures of the best leaders being dragged kicking and screaming into leadership roles, often against their will. Think of St. Augustine the bishop, or C. S. Lewis the teacher.

You think being humble is difficult if you're Dutch? Imagine how difficult it is if you're Swedish!

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Be bold

And once you have listened, and learned, it is time to be bold.

But, bold, how? Bold to put yourself forward? No, bold as Jesus was to come into the boat of those who are being swamped.

For what does Peter learn from Jesus as Jesus speaks to him? “If you want to follow me, then you must note that what I am going to do is the road that you, too, must walk. You must be willing to give up everything, even your life, because there is much, much more involved here than just living out your 75 years and dying quietly.”

And you must do so boldly, not half-heartedly, not tentatively. You must not keep one hand on the boat to steady yourself as your Lord calls you out of the comfort of the boat to come to Him over the waves. You must not keep one hand on your treasures, while you give something with the other. You must not keep one hand on this little rock that we call earth as you embrace eternity. You must be bold to act in ways that show that you know that your life will not be exhausted by death.

Our lives here are part of a much greater story, a story of God's saving love for the whole world, a love that has been in play not only since the time of Jesus, not just since the dawn of humanity, not just for the millions of years since the dawn of living organisms on earth, and not even just for the 4 and a half billion years of earth's history, but for the billions of years before there even was an earth, when all that there was, even as Genesis says, was light.

When you realize that the one who is with us in the boat is the one who brought the whole in to existence, who is the same one who preserves it, and who is the same one who will one day bring it all to perfect fulfillment... then you can be bold in your action and in your speech. Because then what becomes important is not ensuring our own survival; there is Another whose job is to ensure the survival of what really matters in this world. Then we can give ourselves to the task to which He has called us.

Yes, I know that this is also what motivates suicide bombers. They think that by giving themselves they have gained a fuller life in the world to come. But the difference is this: while suicide bombers seek to gain their lives by taking the lives of others, Christian martyrs – for that is what we are talking about –

seek to gain their lives by providing safety for others in the midst of the storm, even if in doing so they lose their own lives.

This does not mean that in every case you will lose your life. In some cases, when we do, Jesus says, our own lives will be enriched. Those who have given themselves to a great cause and survive intact often come back as great leaders and go on to enrich others.

But, even in cases where, in saving others, our own lives are lost, we may lose our lives in this world and thus not survive in this world, but in the end we have gained a fuller life, that of the world to come.

And I don't just mean where your physical life is lost. Being bold in doing the truth and in speaking up for truth and for the author of truth, who is Jesus our Lord, may sometimes mean that you will enter "the valley of social death".

But, if you are worried about speaking up for truth or doing the truth, and you are worried because it might be embarrassing or you might be wrong or someone might look at you as a "religious freak", just remember, all you have to lose is your pride, and pride is a sin anyway, so you might as well give it up.

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Friends, being humble and being bold are great principles to live by. But, they are not simply life principles that anyone can live by. They are only possible if you have been awed, overwhelmed, by having seen that the One who is here with us in this little boat is in fact is the Lord Himself.

If someone truly important were to enter this room right now, all eyes would be on him. Everything that we are doing right now would stop and we would be turn our attention exclusively toward him.

May you go forth from here this morning and with eyes to see the Lord entering your little boat. And then turn your eyes toward Him, learn from Him, and then be bold to go forth and do what He would have you do for His world, which He loves and for which He gave Himself.