

9-12-21
Pentecost 16
Mark 8:27-38
Communion

Follow and See!

Most of the really important things in life are similar in that we really can't know all we want to know about them until we live in the midst of them for a while. I think about our first-year college students who are well into their new surroundings by now. Rush week and orientation are over. They've been in class for a while. Probably been to a ball game by now. They've figured out who their hard teachers are and which ones are cupcakes. Some of them had some idea what they wanted to do with their life when they got there. Others of them didn't have a clue. But most of them will probably change a major or two before they finish their program. Both our boys set out to be journalists. Enrolled in two different programs to do that. But neither of them works for CNN or NPR. Both of them tried it out for a while, but it turned out not to be for them. They're both pretty good with words and ideas, but they apparently weren't cut out to be journalists. Like most worlds, you apparently have to walk around in that world a while before you figure out whether it's the place you need to be.

Jesus didn't have the luxury of changing his major. He was sent into the world with a specific charge and mission. Redeem the world! Set things right between God and rebellious creation! How would you like to sign on for that job description? There was no degree program or certification process to prepare him for what God had sent him to do. There were plenty enough obstacles along the way. But he kept his eye on the goal.

By the time we get to the point in Jesus' story Mark offers us today, that goal is before him. We can sense a change in tone by this time in Mark's story. Jesus takes the disciples aside and

asked them what they're hearing about among the people about who he is and what they're doing. That job description I told you about hadn't been posted for all the world to see, so there were lots of different ideas flying around about what Jesus was all about. The responses of the disciples sound strange to us because the people they say they've heard people say Jesus might be are all dead. John the Baptist. Elijah. One of the other prophets. Those people are all gone. But we need to remember that people thought differently about life and death then than we tend to. It was commonly assumed that some of those great voices would come back when the Messiah came and ushered in the Kingdom of God. So Jesus was probably not surprised when those were the first reactions he got to his question. I'm sure there were people who said Jesus was all those people and probably more, and that any one of those options made sense to many who were trying to figure out what was going on around them.

So Jesus probed further. That's all well and good, he might have said. But what about you? You know me. You've been with me through all these things we've seen and heard and said and done together. What about you? Who do you say I am?

You know it would be Peter who spoke first. I've heard all those other things, too. But I know who you are. You are the Messiah, the One we've all been waiting for all these years.

So Jesus figured he must have been doing something right if at least one of his closest followers had at least that much of an idea about what was going on.

The most important thing going on here, though, is not about Jesus' perception. He knew who he was and what he was about. He tries to help those closest friends understand what is about to happen, but they simply can't hear what he has to tell them. Most of you who have been in church all your life know about that confrontation between Jesus and Peter, and you can probably find yourself in it somewhere. We've all been just like Peter, focused on what was best for us, what made sense to us, to the point that we couldn't focus on the fact that Jesus came to

save the world. Jesus called it setting his mind on human things instead of divine ones, and we all know we've done the same thing. We're grateful we're not on the receiving end of what Peter heard.

That's when Jesus turns to the really important part of today's encounter, what all this means for people who are trying to decide whether to follow him or not.

That means he's also talking to all of us.

Most of us made that decision a long time ago. Whether we sat with a pastor or some other church leader in a class or we made our commitment in a revival meeting or we just decided it was time or any of the hundred other ways we all came to that point our life that called us to decide what we were going to do with Jesus, however we came to that point, most of us have been there. And we decided we would sign up, that we'd be followers of Jesus.

Regardless of how well prepared we thought we were for what came next, there was no way we could know what that decision would require of us and what it would provide us in the way of life-changing things. Some may have tried to tell us that if we would just trust in Jesus, we'd never have a thing to worry about. But we pretty soon figured out that that wasn't true. If we united with the church as young people, we still got our hearts broken like everybody else did. We still struggled with geometry and calculus. Our friends in other church traditions challenged what we believed if it was different than what they believed. Where was all that everything-will-be-ok-if-you-just-trust-in-Jesus stuff when all that happened to us like it did to everybody else?

Some of us didn't sign up early. Some of us didn't come to faith until later in life, after we'd have a few hard knocks, after we'd bumped around a bit. But something brought us to Christ and maybe even to his Church. And we decided there was something about him and something about his people that we needed. We might not have gone into this commitment quite as wide-eyed as those who signed on younger, but we still assumed we had latched on to something that was going to make a

difference in our lives. But then our kids still caused us grief. We didn't see that divorce coming. And we certainly didn't expect to get cancer. A sick grandchild. One of our kids facing a disability. What happened to that it'll-all-be-ok-if-we-follow-Jesus stuff?

And then whenever we decide to follow Jesus, if we live long enough, sooner or later, we'll all be old and alone and unsure about what comes next. What does our faith in him do when we're staring all that in the face?

And what about the crazy state of the world? Aren't we supposed to find some peace in our discipleship? When does that kick in when the world around us seems to be falling apart, and we don't seem to get any more answers than anyone else does?

When we look closely at the call Jesus extended to those folks that day and to us, we discover that he never promised us a pathway with all those questions and all the other ones we encounter along the way answered for us. He never promised us what many who have tried to speak for him promise us. He never said that all would be well in the sense that we want to hear that. He never promised guaranteed health or stable relationships or honest and trustworthy friends or financial security or positive image in the community. In fact, what he calls us to do is to set all that, and most of the other things we value, aside and learn to live a whole new way. His way. And we all know how that turned out for him.

He never had much of what the world values while he lived among us. He wasn't always popular. He generally was when he did what people wanted, but when he confronted evil, when he identified wrong and called for it to be addressed—then, not so much! Even though he lived surrounded by people, most of whom wanted things from him, he lived a pretty isolated life. These few close friends, and you see today that they didn't understand all they thought they did. We can argue about whether he had a family beyond those guys, but if he did, we don't know about it, so we don't know if he had the kinds of sources of strength most of us depend on.

What he did have was a sustaining relationship with God that we all wish we could have too. His mind and heart so were so in line with God's mind and heart that, even when people misunderstood his purpose or openly opposed it, he knew he was doing what he was put here to do. Don't you wish you could know that kind of certainty? That kind of security of purpose?

You can!

That's exactly what he calls us to claim as our identity. That sounds a lot less satisfying than all those other things we strive for. Just like people in his day did, we think all those other things will bring us what they promise. Security. Purpose. Hope. Stability. Whatever it is that we're looking for. But they can't. They couldn't then, and they can't now. But what Jesus promises is exactly what he delivers.

What Jesus says is, "Come and follow! Follow and see if this is not a better way."

The trouble, of course, is that we have to do that following part. We have to walk with him and discover along the way how things will turn out. Sometimes we have to walk hard roads. Sometimes they are easier. Sometimes they seem to be easier for some than for others. They rarely are. There are always struggles.

Scott Peck was a popular Christian thinker a few years back. He borrowed a book title from Robert Frost, so you know I'm going to find something good in it. In his book called *The Road Less Traveled*, he begins by saying that life is difficult. It always has been. It always will be. And anyone who tries to tell us it's not supposed to be that way is not speaking truth. Anyone. Jesus never did. He simply said, leave all that other stuff behind and come follow me. And when you follow, you'll see.

I told our Thursday morning Bible study group the other morning about the most interesting calls I used to get when I was a new church pastor several years ago. It's a scary thing to put up a sign saying there is going to be a new Presbyterian Church on the corner and to put my phone number at the bottom of it. It

didn't take long for that phone to start ringing. Some were just curious, but some wanted real specifics. That Church consisted of a piece of real estate, God, and me at that point. I remember calls asking what the position of the Church would be on abortion. I knew what my position was, but that wasn't what he asked. Another caller wanted to know about gun rights, what would the Church say about that? Then there were the predictable questions about whether we'd let women preach? Yes. And who could take communion? Everybody who believes. None of my answers seemed to be very satisfying to those who called. I told them all the same thing. Why don't you just come and see if this works for you? Come and worship with us. Bring an open mind if you have one. But just come. I doubt we'll talk about all the issues you want to hear about on any given Sunday, but just come. See who we are. See what we do and how we do it. Then decide if this is for you. If it is, then join us, because we're going to need a lot of help. If it's not, then go in peace and look somewhere else.

I don't think I ever saw many of those people who called. Some of them identified themselves when they visited. Some stayed around. Some came and left. But I still think the invitation I offered is the same one Jesus did---come and see, come and follow, follow and see. See if this is what you're looking for. It is the way we have decided to live and follow Jesus together.

In these days, of course, it is almost always followers to whom I get to speak on Sundays. Even some followers are not here these days. Some who are searching may be connecting with us online. I hope so. But many are just trying to figure it out on their own. When you run into those folks, offer them Jesus' invitation. Come. Follow. Follow and see. And together we'll figure it out as we walk together. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Gracious God, words are the best gift we have to express our praise and thanksgiving for all you have done and continue to do

among us, but our words always seem inadequate. Hopefully, the words we offer today will honestly reflect the desire of our hearts and guide us to a strong and faithful relationship with you. We pray first today for health and healing in the midst of our continuing health crisis. We give thanks for weary medical professionals and ask that you give them endurance and strength. Encourage them when they see so much death in spite of their best efforts to care. Comfort those who are sick, and help us to take advantage of the resources available to us.

We pray with remembrance and thanksgiving, asking for still more signs of your grace as we mark the twenty-year anniversary of the attacks of 9/11. Hopefully we have taken some time or will take it now to set aside the strain of everyday life to remember and to honor lives that were lost and responders and caregivers who stepped up then just as they continue to step up in the current crisis. May our remembrance of that terrible day and the days that followed it make us even more motivated to work for peace in the world. We give thanks for churches like ours who believe that cultural and interfaith bridges are good things and that your kingdom will come and your will will be done when your people are faithful to share your love with all. Bind up the wounds of suffering among us. Give us hope for the future you intend for us to know.

We pray for justice for all who are oppressed. Set us all free by the gift of faith. The burdens we carry are heavy and the road forward always seems hard. Turn our eyes away from empty promises, O God. Turn them toward you and toward the places where the future is full of promise and hope. Fill our souls with brave hope so that we can find our purpose and our pathway in you. Unite us with all who love and serve you into one family of faith, lifting our prayers to you. Hear us, Good Lord, for we pray in the name of our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.