

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 28, 2024

Way of Truth, Way of Suffering

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“He said all this quite openly”¹ the author of Mark tells us specifically. Why do you suppose this detail is included in Mark’s terse narrative? I suspect it’s there to stand in juxtaposition to what Jesus tries to keep secret. The two verses immediately prior to our pericope (section of scripture) is one example of Jesus being hush-hush: “[Jesus] asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.”² And there are more instances of this odd secrecy in the first half of Mark’s Gospel. Several times already in Mark, Jesus has silenced demons who are calling him things like “Holy One of God”³ and “Son of the Most High God;”⁴ as well as asking people he has healed not to say anything.⁵ Why this secrecy?

All of these instances of secrecy have to do with Christ’s identity. For whatever reason, Jesus is being careful about how he is being identified and when he will reveal his true identity. There are numerous potential reasons for this. Perhaps Jesus is concerned that if he gets noticed by the authorities too early it will impede the ministry and teaching he was trying to accomplish. Or perhaps he was worried about what his followers and the crowds might do if he revealed himself as the promised Messiah. There were plenty at the time who believed the Messiah would come and lead a revolution against Rome. Those tend to be the two most common inferences in commentaries on Mark, but I’m content to leave Christ’s motivation a mystery.

Setting aside the possible reasons why Jesus is being secretive about his identity at this point in Mark, let’s juxtapose that secrecy to what Jesus is willing to be “quite open” about: his suffering and death. While **not** wanting

¹ Mark 8:32a (NRSVue)

² Mark 8:29-30

³ Mark 1:24c

⁴ Mark 5:7

⁵ cf Mark 1:44; Mark 7:36

people to talk about his miraculous ability to heal or naming him the Son of God; Jesus **is** perfectly comfortable with talking about his rejection, suffering, betrayal, abandonment, and death. Doesn't that seem...well...backwards? It sure seems backwards to Peter! It makes no sense to be quiet about the identity of the long-awaited Savior, while speaking openly about death and suffering. It's ludicrous!

Jesus, who has fed thousands, walked on water, stilled the storm, cast out demons, healed and healed and healed, raised the dead...that Jesus is going to suffer and die? Once again...ludicrous. Backwards. At least according to the gods of this world.

Think about it, who among us wouldn't be shouting at the top of our lungs if our identity were as important as the Messiah's? Who among us wouldn't be using that power in blatant, obvious, and (likely) self-serving ways? And conversely, in the face of a humiliating and gruesome death, who would be talking openly about that? In the face of rejection and betrayal...in the face of looming powerlessness, who among us would be dwelling on that?

As is so often the case, Jesus is showing us how our natural inclinations tend towards self-delusion and self-centeredness. How the gods of this world get us to avoid discomfort, suffering, and death through distraction and silence. But Jesus shows us a different way, the Way of Christ, a Way of moving through the world that is open about suffering and death. A Way that seeks to stand in solidarity with the suffering and dying. A Way that doesn't have to brag about identity or avoid discomfort; but rather a Way that provides the firmest foundation for our identities and a Way that leads us out of our comfort zones.

What might it mean for us to follow this Way of Christ; this Way that involves being open about pain and suffering and being drawn out of our comfort zones for the sake of the suffering. How do we walk that Way? It starts with confronting our fear of pain and death, our fear of the unknown. Rather than letting the gods of this world distract us from the pain of the world, let's face it, let's talk openly about it, let's get uncomfortable, let's be theologians of the cross who call "the thing what it actually is."⁶ Let's take up the cross for the sake of our neighbors, for the sake of the Gospel, and for the sake of Christ.

⁶ Luther, Martin. "Heidelberg Disputation." 1518 CE. <https://bookofconcord.org/other-resources/sources-and-context/heidelberg-disputation/#21>

The Montgomery Bus boycotts stand as an example of walking this Way. Martin Luther King Jr. and others worked together to call segregation what it was: evil. They then left the (relative) comfort of their various lives and took action to stand in solidarity with one another and with the suffering of all black Americans. They took up their crosses by rearranging their lives for one another: arranging months-long carpools, cooking regular community meals, and holding mass meetings to encourage one another and be reminded of their shared values and shared identity. They spoke openly about pain and suffering and they stood in solidarity with those experiencing it.

This is the Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross. It is not an easy Way to follow. And it will, with 100% certainty, lead us into conflict with the gods of this world. The gods of this world who will do things like get you to think that gluttony is about eating too much rather than not hoarding wealth, or that fasting for Lent is a great excuse to try a new diet, since weight-loss is the point, right?

The Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross, means rejecting the shortcuts the world offers. It means ignoring the distractions the world throws at us. It means standing where Christ stood, in the center of the world's pain, and trying to embrace it. Pouring ourselves out to minister to it. Laying down our lives to alleviate it, even the tiniest bit. It means acknowledging our own pain, it means accepting our own deaths. It means being grounded in Christ. Not Christ in glory at the right hand of God...no...rather Christ, dirty, broken, and bleeding on the Cross...that is where we ground our identity. In the love of God most perfectly expressed on the cross.

In the end there may be some juxtaposing going on in our reading today, but that juxtaposition is only temporary. While Jesus is secretive about his divine identity for much of Mark's Gospel, he stands fully revealed in one place within it: from the foot of the cross, a Roman centurion exclaims, "Truly this man was God's Son!"⁷ At the culmination of Christ's mission to embrace the world's pain and suffering, Jesus stretches his arms wide on the cross, standing at the center of the world's pain, suffering, brokenness, and death. And there he overcomes it all. He takes on all the pain and brokenness of the world to show us a different Way. A Way of Suffering, true...but more importantly, a Way of Love. Love that will, one day, overcome all pain and suffering forever. Amen.

⁷ Mark 15:39c