

“Saving Your Life”

Mark 8:27–38

March 12, 2006

The Second Sunday of Lent

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

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²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he began to teach 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, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Prayer.

Respect is one of those values that is taught early in life, and either you get it or you don't. We would like to think that it comes from loving parents, but in today's world that cannot always be assumed. Increasingly so, we have come to rely upon public school teachers to teach the essentials:

1. Politeness in all things– “yes please” and “no thank you”
2. Honoring elders– never address someone who is older than you by

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- their first name. Use mister, miss, ms, or mrs.
3. Don't speak unless you are spoken to. Keep your elbows off the table. Don't speak with food in your mouth. No singing at the table. Don't play with your food. Hold the door open for others. "Ma'm" and "Sir" Etc ...

As children age into youth and adulthood, the rules relax a bit. This allows for close ties to be made with influential adults. That special student and teacher find an ability to relate at a deeper level. Mentor relationships are allowed to form. This is good, and to be encouraged.

I always enjoyed my male only fishing camp that I led for many summers. Put two or three young boys in a boat with an exceptional adult role model, and healthy relationships – some of them being life long relationships – begin to form.

Though the rules relax, they are always the unspoken reality in social settings. To this day, I still have a hard time calling my seniors anything other than Mr. or Mrs. And to be honest, it goes both ways. I still struggle with the respect that is shown to me as a pastor or as an adult, because, deep down inside I recognize the fact that I'm just another person like everyone else.

This relationship, between a youth and an adult, between a student and a teacher, is very much under a magnifying glass in today's Gospel. In a method of teaching very common in the day, Jesus the teacher – Jesus the Rabbi – is asking questions of his students. He knows the answers when he asks them. The point is to have the disciples do the thinking, the hard work, the heavy lifting. It is one thing to be told an answer. It is much more profound when the student solves the theorem, goes to the source and writes the paper, or builds it with their own two hands.

"Who do people say that I am?" (v.27) Jesus breaks the ice. "oh, you know," they respond like a wet dish towel, "Robert Schuler or Billy Graham. Some great preacher, prophet, or pope." **"But who do you say that I am?"** (v.29) he paints them into a corner. There is no place to go. There is no place to hide.

A relationship with Jesus Christ isn't about what other people say. It is built upon what you believe.

It is of little interest what your parents believe, what your Sunday school teachers believed, what the church doctrine says to believe in, or even

what your preacher tells you to believe. Jesus wants to know what you believe. What is your answer?

To be quite honest, it would be my guess that there is a lot of what some Christians believe that would put Jesus to shame. I have never been able to understand how some can worship the Prince of Peace, and in the same breath, want to kill Moslems, Jews, or any other human beings. I don't understand how some can worship the Lord of Love, and turn around and hate their neighbors, because they are different, come from a distant land, have a different lifestyle, or have a different pigment to their skin.

Jesus isn't interested in what others are saying about him. He wants to know what you believe, and what you are going to do about it.

The tension is almost palpable. You can almost feel the uncomfortable nature of the moment. Jesus puts every last one of them on the spot. I've been told that in the Army you quickly learn not to volunteer for anything. The one who offers, makes themselves vulnerable. The employee who responds to an employer's request is opening themselves to criticism and public scrutiny.

None of the disciples are quite like Peter. He is outspoken, unpolished, inexperienced in the ways of the world. You can tell that he was probably raised in a permissive household that encouraged the development of his outgoing, gregarious personality.

"You are the Messiah," Peter boldly proclaims (v.29).

And Jesus promptly tells him to keep it to himself. One would expect that Jesus would reward initiative; after all, he is simply answering his question like a good student. Instead "he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." (v.30)

What gives?

The people thought they knew what Messiah would mean. They thought it meant a revolutionary freedom fighter, sent from God, whose purpose was to fight the Romans, take back the Promised Land, restore the government, and re-establish the Kingdom of David, just as it had been a thousand years earlier.

But Jesus had a different vision of what it meant to be set free.

Jesus rejects being defined by people's opinion, popularity, or aspirations. Peter isn't given the freedom to define who Jesus is or what was his purpose. "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (v.33) Oh, yes, it would have been tempting for Jesus to make himself king. But that isn't why he came.

Peter, you've got it backwards. Jesus came to free the world of its sins, to give sight to the blind, to release the prisoner, to proclaim the year of the Lord, indeed, to win victory over the grave and make a claim for God's kingdom – on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus defines who he is and why he has come. It was true two thousand years ago, and it is true today.

I look around today and I see lots of Christians who are doing exactly what Peter was doing. They think they have Jesus in their back pocket. They'll use Jesus to weasel their way into positions of power and authority. They'll use Jesus as a threat against all others who don't agree with them. Oh yes, they will use Jesus as a weapon to be handled and they believe they have a license to kill. They'll wield Jesus with wonton abandon to cut people down and damn them to hell.

Whenever we make the statement that Jesus is on my side and supports my political agenda, we are walking a very dangerous catwalk. We are using Peter's paintbrush to paint Jesus into a corner. It is an unfaithful attempt to manage and market Jesus the way we would want him to be.

But Jesus doesn't give Peter this privilege. And he doesn't give it to us, either. He turns Peter around and tells him to deny himself, pick up his cross, and to follow him. Pick up your cross – that is, go to the death if necessary – give up your life for Jesus and the Gospel, and you will be saved.

Salvation isn't for any one of us to dole out according to criteria that we arbitrarily establish. Salvation is Jesus' to give. His prerogative. His call. Not yours. Not mine. Not the Church. His alone.

The strong headed beware! Go your own way – attempt to exert your own control – don't hand control of your life over to Jesus – and you are headed down a road leading to destruction.

"Let go; and let God," I've heard it said before quite elegantly. Relinquish

the command and control of your life and turn it over to Christ.

Ultimately, our Gospel lesson for this morning is all about the individual; our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He doesn't want to know what others think. He wants to know what you believe. In my personal relationship with Christ, he wants to know what I believe, and just as importantly, what I'm going to do about it.

It isn't about how to handle Jesus; it is all about letting Jesus handle you. The way of Jesus isn't about taking control of your life, it is all about giving your life away; giving your life to Christ and placing it into his hands.

In my personal relationship with Christ, this hasn't always been easy. I'm as strong willed and pig headed as the next man. Yet Christ calls me back. Jesus treats me like a work in progress, like a half worked piece of clay in the hands of a potter.

It can be the same for you, too. Go ahead. Let go; and let God. Join me on the journey. Who knows where Jesus might lead, what wonder Jesus might reveal, what glory is prepared at the hand of the Father?

It is a great journey. For this, and for you, I give thanks.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.