

GOSPEL*Mark 8:27–38*

This story provides the turning point in the Markan gospel. Peter is the first human being in the narrative to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, but he cannot accept that as the Messiah Jesus will have to suffer. Moreover, Jesus issues a strong challenge to all by connecting discipleship and the cross.

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."

It seems that almost every night on television these days there is some program anyone can watch that has been called “reality TV.” Most of the premises of the programs, whether it is some group living together like Big Brother, or somebody learning to dance, or some show about picking a potential life companion, all sort of center around the idea that - is watch you see watch you get? How are people going to react when they find out this or that about a particular person and we sort of tune-in to see how it may unfold. It is just human nature to want to peer in – many in the Cleveland area tuned in this last month to watch Hard Knocks, the television show that gave an inside glimpse of the training camp for the Cleveland Browns.

It is often fascinating how people interact with one another especially behind closed doors. The discovery of being in relationship with others begins as the image we project onto other people either holds true, strengthens, or in most cases under goes a great metamorphosis. Awhile back, I read a book cleverly entitled, “Everybody’s Normal Until you get to Know them.” There is a great truth to that statement. Probably one of the driving forces behind the popularity of these televisions shows is that people watch because they want to see how others are going to react when they find this out or discover that about some other person. Apparently, we have attached entertainment value to seeing a person construct a certain image of a person only to see it crumble as reality sets in.

The truth is that we all are like that. We are like that with new neighbors, new coworkers, new members of a church, and just about all-new relationships. If we are just a little bit positive in our outlook about humanity and life, we are likely to assume the best about people. For those who are married there likely was a time in the early stages of the

relationship when you thought the other person was the total person, they almost walked on water, we were perhaps intoxicated of just being in their presence; but then there is that first time that we discover a certain quality about that person that we don't like. We begin to ask questions like: "What do you mean you don't like that? What do you mean that is not the way to do this? What do you mean that you think things should be like that? What do you mean you do not want to watch football all day on Sundays? It is then that our inflated images of one another begin to come back down to a new reality, and people then must ask themselves seriously, do I want to continue to build this relationship?

When we are honest and take a thorough look at our relationship with Christ, the reality is that we also have sort of built a particular image of who we think Christ is. It is tough to admit, but the reality is that we can put Jesus into a certain box as well.

In our Gospel passage from Mark today we have Jesus checking out the perceptions of who people think he is and what he should be about. So Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Here they were at Caesarea Philippi, the very center of Roman power and all that is wise and they answer, "Oh that's easy -- John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets. Then Jesus gets personal and asks the disciples, as he continues to ask us today, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter says, "You are the Messiah!" Peter gets it right, Peter nails it on the head, but then what unfolds next for him is a jarring reality. Peter starts with the right idea: "You are the Messiah," but then Jesus 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. Simon Peter objects. He takes Jesus aside and begins to scold him.

Peter's objection to Jesus' promised suffering makes sense. He had made considerable sacrifice to follow Jesus. He and his brother Andrew had left a thriving fishing business and the security of their Galilean home when Jesus said, "Come, and follow me." They staked their future on the assumption that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah who would restore the fortunes of Israel and save the people.

Throughout their existence the Jews never lost sight of the fact that they were God's chosen people. They always regarded the greatest days in their history as the days of King David, and they dreamed of a day when there would arise another king of David's line, a king who would once again make them great in righteousness and in power. As time went on, it became clear that this dreamed-of greatness would never come about naturally through the passage of time, for they came under Assyrian rule and Babylonian rule and Persian rule and Greek rule and Roman rule. They began to believe that it wasn't likely that someone would simply emerge politically. More and more they began to dream of a day when God would intervene in history and unveil the Messiah. They had dreams of a Messiah being ushered in by God in a nationalistic, conquering style, in which the perfect reign of God would come about through a great military struggle.

This was the Jewish belief. This was the disciples' belief, so the idea that Jesus would be a suffering Messiah was the complete opposite of what they expected. Jesus as a suffering Messiah was a foreign of an idea to them.

Jesus had become a person that the disciples wanted to follow. Here was the one who was about something important; one who heals, gives hope, and Jesus had become popular and attracted quite a following. But Jesus shatters their preconceived notions. This is the leader that keeps pulling them out of what is comfortable and throwing them into something new. Jesus begins to tell what the journey will look like. There will be rejection and death for him as he heads for Jerusalem and crucifixion.

What about our preconceived notions of Christ? Even on this side of the cross event, on this side of the resurrection, what do we expect Jesus to be? Do we want a breadwinner messiah? A Jesus who can take the bread and fish and feed multitudes? A Jesus that will guarantee us a life when we won't ever be in need? Do we doctor messiah? A Jesus who heals all who are sick? A messiah that somehow guarantees that we will be spared from illness. Do we want a Torah messiah? A Jesus that gets everyone to behave and act morally? A Messiah that will rid the town of all crime and people we don't want around? Do we want a King Messiah, a Jesus that will not just rule over Israel but all the kingdoms of the earth? The truth is that to one degree or another this was part of the expectations of not only some who were following Jesus, but even the very closest disciples themselves, and the harder reality when we are honest, is that these are still some of our expectations today. It is not that these notions and hope are totally without merit, the challenge becomes if we make any of these the box in which we view how Jesus can act in this world.

A famous philosopher, argued cynically that it was not God who made man in his image, but man who made God in his image. For this person, God was a projection of our own desires and thoughts. In some respects, there is some truth to it. Very often we mold God in our image.

We embrace God, not the God revealed in Scripture, but the God who fits nicely into our pattern of religious belief. Sometimes, we embrace Christ without the scandal, without the stigma, without the cross. We will have Jesus, as long as he meets our criteria, and plays nicely on our turf. It is then that we can domesticate Jesus. We can make him just ordinary, familiar and acceptable, and we can push aside some of the tougher statements of Jesus: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” As Paul tells us, the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

Where is Jesus working on us? Where is Jesus pushing our boundaries? Where are our thoughts on Jesus being challenged and reshaped? What reality in our lives is being transformed because of our faith?

The author CS Lewis once met a man who said that he found God very interesting. To which, Lewis replied, God is not interesting; he is deeply disturbing. Let us look at ourselves in the light of the cross of Christ, and allow ourselves to be challenged and changed along the way. This week how will Jesus reshape your image of God in this world? Amen.