

Church of the Savior-Episcopal
Orange City, Iowa
Rev. Dr. Karen Wacome, Celebrating
Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preaching
15th Sunday in Pentecost
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Mark 8.27-39

Losers for Jesus

In the classic film *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter*, Jesus appears on the scene in modern day Ottawa, Canada, a city beset by an infestation of vampires. The vampires, mutants who can operate in daylight, are preying on the city's lesbians, for whose tender flesh they have a nefarious use. Jesus does rather ineffectual battle with this sinister army, until the beautiful Mary Magnum shows up to help him. She begins by updating his appearance so he'll be less conspicuous. She has him cut off his flowing hair and long beard, and she brings him to a used clothing store where he can trade in his white robe for something, as she politely puts it, "more urban." Jesus tries on one outfit after another, each more goofy, geeky, out of date and, in Mary's eyes, embarrassing, than the last. She finally has to pick something for him. We want Jesus on board for the battle of good against evil, but it sure isn't easy to make him presentable.

Today's text from the gospel of Mark portrays an unpleasant scene where the real Jesus embarrasses his real disciples. If we back up to the verses just prior to those we just read, we find Jesus passing through the town of Bethsaida, where he encounters a blind man. He rubs some spit into his eyes, but this restores his sight only partially: "*I can see people but they look like trees, walking*" (8.24). So Jesus tries again, laying his hands on the man's eyes, and now he sees everything clearly. Through Mark's narrative up to now, Jesus has been trying to get his

disciples clearly to see who he is, but they are like the man who can see only indistinctly. They have no distinct vision of who Jesus is. Maybe one more try will do it. But Jesus is not sanguine about his obtuse followers having at last come around. He proceeds indirectly.

Jesus diffidently asks, “*Who do people say that I am?*” The disciples report: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. The crowds have seen the miracles, the healings and the mass feedings. They’ve heard the vivid but enigmatic parables. It’s no surprise that they’ve tried to fit Jesus into their religious categories. In contrast, Jesus has been privately explaining the meaning of his words and actions to his closest followers. By now they should see distinctly who he is. “*But who do you say that I am?*” Eager Peter is proud to answer: “*You are the Messiah!*” Finally, they get it! Jesus is no recycled prophet. He is God’s anointed, the redeemer of Israel, the savior of the nations. Jesus’ reaction is unexpected. “*He sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*” The disciples anticipate being praised for their grasp of the import of Jesus’ role and mission. They’re not expecting to be put down for getting the right answer. Surely they expect Jesus to commend them and send them to proclaim that they have found the Messiah.

What does Jesus mean? Is it, “*Don’t tell people that I am the Messiah!*” This is how Jesus’ words usually have been understood. Taken this way, the text is a principal one behind the famous problem of the “Messianic secret” in Mark’s gospel. Why does Jesus demand silence of the demons? Why does he heal people and then tell them to keep quiet about it? Why does he bring Jairus’ daughter back from death, and try to get people to think he didn’t? And why does Jesus respond in this surprising way to Peter’s confession? Some scholars have tried to make the

problem disappear: Jesus never tried to keep his identity secret; Mark made all this up after the fact to account for the fact that the people of Israel did not accept Jesus as their Messiah. Taken seriously, this leads quickly to the implausible conclusion that almost nothing in Mark's gospel is historically accurate.

Another answer, favored by many conservative students of the text, is that in Jesus' day the idea of the Messiah had become so closely associated with violent insurrection against Rome that he had to avoid publicly claiming his rightful title. If he had permitted people to proclaim him Israel's Messiah, the authorities' response would have been swift and violent. Being cheered by the crowds as the Messiah guaranteed arrest and execution. I have doubts about this explanation because he does so many things that are overt claims to messiahship, and because right after ordering his disciples not to talk about him, he quite openly foretells that this is precisely what awaits him. He can hardly be saying, "*Don't talk about me being the Messiah*" because he thinks this will lead to the cross, but then immediately predict his crucifixion.

So I don't think Jesus is saying, "*Don't tell people that I am the Messiah!*" Instead, I think he means, "*Stop talking about me! You've got it so wrong that it's better you say nothing about me!*" Does this make sense? Jesus *is* the Messiah! But what Jesus says next shows that the disciples' readiness to proclaim that he is the Messiah arises from a radical misconception of who he is. For his response to Peter's "*You are the Messiah!*" is to tell them that he is going to suffer, to be rejected and killed. This is desperately at odds with everything they have in mind when they triumphantly announce that he is the Messiah. They see him as the powerful, glorious

winner who will defeat their enemies and make things right. They see him as doing God's proper work in the world, at last vindicating the righteous and giving the wicked what's coming to them. But Jesus recognizes their eagerness to embrace him as Messiah for what it is: their rejection of the God whose human face we see in Jesus, the God makes weakness, defeat and loss his own. Jesus emphatically contrasts his way, the way of the cross, to their proclamation of him as Messiah.

Tradition portrays Peter's threefold denial—"Damn it! I don't know the man!"—the night he was interested as his deplorable betrayal of Jesus. But I don't think so. There, he is heartbroken, demoralized and afraid; his failure to acknowledge Jesus is a predictable human failure. It reveals the unsurprising cowardice beneath his bluster. Peter's terrible denial of Jesus happens not there but earlier, here, as he proudly asserts Jesus is God's anointed and then, after Jesus responds with this crazy talk of rejection and defeat, takes him aside and rebukes him. Think of a political candidate who, after one campaign stop too many, starts saying embarrassing things and has to be shut up and hustled out of sight by his handlers. Peter and the disciples disapprove of Jesus when he starts talking this way, when he acts as if he's not willing to use his awesome power on behalf of justice, righteousness, and God's glory. They're embarrassed for him and by him. They are downright *ashamed* of him when he talks about being bested by the scribes, the elders, and the chief priests. He's losing his nerve, giving up, rather than leading God's campaign to make things right. They have sacrificed so much to follow him, and now he's snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. He's making them vulnerable. He's making them look foolish. Come on Jesus, get with the program!

Angrily, Jesus calls Peter out: “*Get out of my way, Satan!*” Peter imagines he’s helping Jesus get through a moment of weakness, a bad patch on the way to his messianic glory, but Jesus sees him blocking his way to the cross. Jesus pulls no punches: to be ashamed of him is to be ashamed of God, the God who has chosen not to condemn and reject but to be condemned and rejected, the God who goes to the cross and sacrifices himself for the unworthy. Peter, understandably, is ashamed to be associated with such a loser. It makes perfect human sense to feel like this, to feel ashamed for a God who humiliates himself in this way.

No less than Peter, we can be ashamed of God today. A dedicated churchgoer who had done all kinds of wonderful service once confided to me that, although he seemed like a good candidate, he couldn’t become a deacon because he didn’t believe that Jesus was God. The idea of God becoming man, he said, was demeaning to God. *Exactly*. And so much more if God gets himself condemned for sedition and blasphemy and put to death in a messy, public manner. But Jesus’ command to stop obstructing, and start following, him has a sharper edge, one that cuts closer to home: “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” Jesus casts a stark alternative. If one does not deny himself and go the way of the cross, then he is ashamed of Jesus. If we do not deny ourselves but instead save our own lives, then, like Peter, we deny Jesus.

What is he talking about? What is it to deny oneself and take up Jesus’ cross? Last month the Lutherans held their convention in Minneapolis where they took up some of the contentious

issues about human sexuality that have divided many Christian groups, not least the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. In due course they got down to the hotly contested motion fully to include gays and lesbians in the life of the church. On the floor of the huge convention hall holding thousands of Lutherans green and red microphones were positioned so anyone who wanted to could make a statement. Those who wanted to speak for going ahead with the proposal came up and spoke at the green microphone and those against it spoke from the red microphone. Nadia Bolz-Weber, pastor of *The House of All Saints and Sinners* in Denver, was there, and she relates that as she listened to people's comments, she,

would try to fight off thoughts like "Man, that guy's an idiot!" with more or less success. I watched people say prayerful things, hurtful things, thoughtful things, and idiotic things on both sides of the aisle....And then a young pastor got up to speak at the green microphone and the first thing he said, in a quivering voice, was "Anyone else frightened to speak? I'm shaking. Please pray for me" and the man standing right next to him at the red microphone reached over and laid his hand on him and prayed while his brother of the opposing viewpoint spoke. Then I knew that Jesus was really there, between the red and green microphones. Not in some sort of neutral "Jesus as Switzerland" sort of way, but in the "You must lose your life to gain it" sort of way. Jesus is between the red and the green microphones...between the red and the blue states offering us life and salvation in the Words of eternal life and in the Sacrament of his own body and blood. Jesus right there between the liberals and conservatives speaking the word that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Jesus standing there between those who are harmed and those doing the harming saying forgive as you have been forgiven.

When so much is at stake, when we need to take a stand for our principles and defend everything that is good, and right, and true, where we want so much to assert, not deny, ourselves, what kind of loser lets go of what deeply matters to take the hand of the guy who is wrong? When what's up for grabs is purity, truth, justice, academic integrity, the American way, or whatever looms over us claiming ultimate importance, who's ready to let it go for something greater than the values we hold dear? Who wants to lose her well-earned claim to being right and being in the right at the foot of that cross, where a loser God hangs, useless, pathetic and powerless...and the vampires are lurking out there? What kind of loser forsakes all that is sensible and respectable in religion--and everywhere else--to take hold of that cross, to accept God's reckless, unconditional, no strings attached love and forgiveness, and—worse—to pass on it on to everyone who comes our way, as patently undeserving as they may be?

Over The Rhine's Karen Berquist, sings a lovely song called "Jesus in New Orleans." Today's text brought it to mind, and I'll conclude with some of its lyrics. It begins:

The last time I saw Jesus
I was drinking bloody Mary's in the South
In a barroom in New Orleans
Rinsin' out the bad taste in my mouth

She wore a dark and faded blazer
With a little of the lining hanging out
When the jukebox played Miss Dorothy Moore
I knew that it was him without a doubt

and the song concludes:

I know I'm not a martyr
I've never died for anyone but me
The last frontier is only
The stranger in the mirror that I see

But when I least expect it
Here and there I see my savior's face

He's still my favorite loser
Falling for the entire human race.

Let our prayer be that we not be ashamed of the God who so wantonly comes to us in Jesus, but
that we deny ourselves and follow him. *Amen*