

The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.

Sermon for Proper 19, Year B

Mark 8:27-38

If I were to walk down the street and ask the question: “Who is Jesus?” I’m sure I’d get all types of answers.

Some won’t know much about him. Some will be angry about all the wrong things which have been done in Jesus’ name. Some only know him as a swear word. While others might speak more favorably about him.

You’d think within Christian circles, such as if I were to walk up and down the aisle here and ask each of you the same question about who Jesus is, that I’d get a consistent answer, but this probably wouldn’t be true. You see, for some Christians, Jesus is the best ‘go to’ guy for good advice. For others, he’s the one you go to in order to get fixed or healed or made whole. Some think he’s the one to go to in order to get some good news so you can feel good about yourself. For others he’s a friend you can always turn to because he promises to always be there for you. Some think he’s a holy man, a spiritual guru, a loving shepherd for wayward sheep, or a teacher. Some might look to him as their ethical and moral compass and try to copy or emulate his example. Others reckon he’s their King, their Saviour, and their champion. He’s also a forgiver, a cleanser, and a redeemer. He’s the one you want on your side.

Now, there’s truth in each of these descriptions, but that’s not what Jesus tells us about himself today. And if we really want to know who Jesus is, then we should take notice of what he says about himself!

So, who is Jesus—according to Jesus?

Well, right after Peter’s bold confession that Jesus is the Christ, which meant he’s the promised Messiah whom the whole Jewish nation has been waiting for over many generations; Jesus boldly told them he’s going to suffer, be rejected by religious leaders, be killed, and then rise again.

So, according to Jesus’ own words, who is Jesus? He’s one who suffers. He’s one who is abused and persecuted. He’s one who is abandoned and insulted. He’s one who is betrayed, scorned and discarded by people who confess faith in God. He’s also a victim of horrific cruelty and

death despite his innocence. He's also one who will live again after dying.

We have a symbol in many churches which reflects this particular picture of Jesus. It's called a crucifix which depicts Jesus' own description of him suffering and dying for us on the Cross.

When you look at the crucifix, it's not the usual picture of strength or power or might or glory. It's not a picture which sits comfortably in a world where children are taught to look to, and emulate, the mighty heroes from Harry Potter, Marvel studios, Star Wars, or even Disney. Jesus on the Cross is not cute, cuddly, attractive, or even acceptable in a politically correct world.

Yet this is who Jesus says he is! He's one who cares so much for us he willingly suffers and dies for us!

But, if this is who Jesus is, then he's hardly the type of person we want to follow (or want our children to follow), especially if we want to be successful, popular, or attractive according to the world's standards!

To follow someone who suffers for the sake of others, allows people to abuse him, doesn't retaliate when people are violent or lying about him, and who will even lay down his life so that criminals can receive pardon and freedom, well, that doesn't sound like someone most people would want to follow!

So, it's no wonder Peter attempts to tell Jesus off!

After all, Peter's already abandoned his fishing career to follow Jesus, and this is what's in store for him? Peter doesn't want to follow a loser! In the same way, we don't want to follow a loser either!

But this is who Jesus is – a loser. Jesus is the One who loses face; the One who loses dignity; and the One who loses his life. And he loses all these things for our sake.

But what's more, if we want to follow him, then that's what we're also going to be in the eyes of most people: a loser, because followers of Jesus will also deny their own selfish instincts in order to put other people first like Jesus did!

It's no accident this text sits right in the middle of Mark's gospel account of Jesus' life. It's the key to understanding who Jesus is and what it means for us in our life of faith.

The uncomfortable question is: If this is who Jesus is and what he expects of us (because he also expects us to deny ourselves and our own desires for the sake of others), then do we follow him or not?

He tells his followers to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. This isn't easy!

Thinking about each of these things in turn, to deny ourselves is to deny our own selfish human nature, after all, most of what we do is all about ourselves!

Why do we have arguments at school or at home? Because each person is trying to get what they want for themselves. Why do children throw tantrums? Because they want to get something for themselves. Why do we have political games? Because people are trying to save or improve their own position. Why do we have road rage? Because people are angry they didn't get their own right of way.

Its human nature to want to impose ourselves and our own wants and desires on each other as if "I'm the god you should obey!"

Jesus' answer to our human problem of selfishness is his own self/lessness. Everything he did was never for himself. Because he loves us all so much, he suffered and died for us to take the punishment for our selfishness. He paid the price so that we would be forgiven and no longer need to make up for all the times we hurt him (or those around us) as a result of our own self-centeredness.

When he tells his followers to deny themselves, he's calling us to love those around us more than we love ourselves. This doesn't mean we always give them what they want (because that would only encourage them to become more selfish and self-centered), but instead we're willing to serve them with what they need – love, forgiveness, compassion, and a justice which mirrors the life of Jesus.

When one becomes a follower of Jesus who denies oneself and their own egocentric desires, it will mean the sacrificing of some of our own things for the sake of others.

In this case, we don't need to hang on a cross like Jesus did, but as we learn to love others more than ourselves (because this is what Jesus does for us), then it will feel as if part of our own selfish nature is suffering and dying for the sake of someone else.

In daily life, this might happen when children help their parents with family duties rather than going off to play their favourite game, or parents help their children with homework instead of watching their favorite television program, or as people choose not to punish someone for the pain they caused them, and instead forgive them.

We'll experience heartache as we choose not to punish someone for the pain they caused us and instead forgive them.

We'll experience persecution from our own family members when we choose to follow Jesus by attending worship services when we (or they) would rather be somewhere else.

We'll feel as if part of us is dying when we put our own selfish desires to death for the sake of those around us.

While many people will have their own ideas and pictures of who Jesus is and what he does, what Jesus describes to us today about himself is one of the most shocking and disturbing!

On the other hand, it's also Jesus at his most loving as he sacrifices himself for us so we may all receive God's radical justice of forgiveness, life, and salvation. He does all this, not because any of us deserve it, but because this is who he is: loving, faithful, patient, compassionate, and selfless.

What a selfish and uncaring world needs right now isn't more self-centeredness (or even more laws to restrict people's egocentricity), but it needs more followers of Jesus who will love and care and serve others selflessly like he did.

Jesus tells us what it cost him to love us so selflessly. The twist is: to accept his love, trust him in return, and to love others as yourself, will also come at a cost to us as we follow him into his life of selflessness.

This is because, the more we get to know the nature and work of Jesus, the more we will get to know our own nature and the nature of those around us. But as we learn to trust the words and work of Jesus, as we bathe in his baptismal waters and receive his holy body and blood in the Lord's Supper, his own nature will rub off on us and help us to be selfless as well.

So, as we take up our cross to follow Jesus, may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in the sacrificial love of Christ Jesus. Amen.