

16th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 24 (B)
September 12, 2021
Text: Mark 8:27-38

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Identity is at the heart of our gospel story for today—Jesus’ identity and our identity. The two belong together. But for Jesus, and for us, it’s all too easy to get that identity wrong, to misunderstand who Jesus is, and by extension, to fail to recognize who we really are. Our story starts with a question about Jesus’ identity. Jesus asked, “How do people identify me?” And he got some interesting responses. Some people thought he was John the Baptist come back to life. Others thought he was long-awaited Elijah, sent by God to prepare God’s people for the day of judgment. And then, Jesus asked, “How do you identify me?” Peter had the right answer. He said, “You are the Messiah,” the One anointed by God to save God’s people. But unfortunately, Peter didn’t understand at all what that meant. Peter seemed to imagine that Jesus would be a Messiah like old King David, a leader who would smash Israel’s enemies and restore the nation’s glory.

But Jesus recognized that to be God’s Anointed One—to lead, not just the people of Israel but the whole human family, into new life with God—would unavoidably include suffering and death. The leaders who benefitted from the way things were saw Jesus as a threat to their power, so Jesus knew they would not rest until they had put an end to that danger. Maybe it seems strange to imagine Jesus, with his message of love and forgiveness, as dangerous. But the Pharisees, who were religious reformers, hated Jesus because he said their program for renewing the spiritual life of God’s people was nothing more than a distraction from what really mattered. Jesus accused them of multiplying insignificant religious obligations while ignoring the truly essential matters of faith—love in action that looked like justice, compassion and mercy for those in need. The temple priesthood, who were using the temple to exploit the common people and make themselves wealthy, hated Jesus because he told the truth about what they were doing and called them faithless in their stewardship of God’s people. Rome was wary of Jesus because anyone who disturbed the status quo threatened to disturb the flow of wealth that was being extracted from the people to go to the empire. Everybody in power had reason to see Jesus as a threat. Jesus understood that it wasn’t possible for him to remain true to his calling to embody the reign of God and live to a ripe old age.

This truth was too much for Peter, who tried to tell Jesus to “just knock off this nonsense”—which is why he received such a harsh rebuke. Jesus, in essence, called Peter the enemy of God, whose mind was on human things, not divine things. Jesus was the Messiah, God’s very own Anointed One—but completely embodying God’s way of compassion and justice and open welcome could only lead to conflict with those who benefitted from exclusion and injustice and division. And Jesus would not back down. He would not compromise in a way that suggested God could be OK with exclusion and injustice, or that God was happy with properly done religious activities in the absence of justice for the poor and mercy for those in need. The reign of God that Jesus proclaimed and embodied was all about a universal human community renewed and made whole, where no one was excluded and everyone had enough.

And if Peter had a hard time understanding what Jesus had to say about his own identity, I'm afraid the Church has had at least as much difficulty hearing what Jesus says to us about our identity: Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. I'm afraid that what jumps to mind for me is self-flagellating monks, and grim, stern Puritans, and the Inquisition doing its best to stamp out anything that looks like joy. Fortunately, all of those couldn't be further from what Jesus is actually picturing for us. I think it might help to break Jesus' message down into three pieces: first—deny yourself; second—take up your cross; and third—lose your life for Jesus' sake and the sake of the gospel.

First, then, “deny yourself” is not about refusing to give yourself what you really want, or delaying gratification of your desires. It's not about neglecting your needs or making sure you're never really happy. In Jesus' day, your identity was defined by your family relationships, your clan. You were “so-and-so's son or daughter,” and the purpose of your life was to bring honor to your family and not bring shame to your family. In our culture, a person's identity is defined by their career, their wealth, status or success. Or maybe it's defined by their political affiliation, or their race or gender. And your purpose in life is to be the very best “you” you can be—because it really is all about you. But Jesus says that to follow him means that those things will no longer define you. Your identity is not your career or your social standing or anything other than being a child of God, forgiven and set free to be God's person in the world, following Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness and wide-open community. You might still have the same job and same relationships, but now those things are nothing more than opportunities for living with love and mercy and justice. Everything about your life now belongs to Jesus and the reign of God that he embodied.

Second, “take up your cross” is not about enduring misfortune graciously. It's not about putting up with chronic pain or a bad relationship. For Jesus, the cross was the consequence he faced for messing with social boundaries and challenging injustices. Jesus made powerful people nervous, so they nailed him to a cross. When we take up our cross, it means accepting whatever consequences may come when we live like Jesus—when we act as though every person has value; when we act as though having different justice systems for rich people and poor people is an abomination; when we act as though Jesus' practices of forgiveness and humility and generosity and love of enemies really matter. For example, as we've passed the 20th anniversary of 9/11, I think it's important to let forgiveness and reconciliation and love of enemies be part of our national conversation. But I haven't heard anyone trumpeting those themes—and I imagine that anyone who did would experience consequences. When Jesus calls us to take up our cross, he isn't saying that those consequences are good, or that suffering is good. After all, Jesus spent most of his time healing people and alleviating suffering. It's just that, when you embody Jesus' values, consequences are unavoidable.

And third, “lose your life for my sake and the sake of the gospel”—oh my. It sounds like a call to some kind of martyrdom, or even self-annihilation, but it's not. It's not really even “religious.” It sounds like Jesus' memorable, exaggerated, over-the-top language—except in this case I think he really means for us to take him seriously. If you deny yourself, deny that culturally approved

life of being a good little consumer, a good little Republican or Democrat, if you turn your back on that life in order to embrace Jesus' way of love and compassion and forgiveness and generosity, there really is a life you are losing. But there is also a life you are gaining. You're losing a life defined by human things, but gaining a life defined by divine things. You're losing a life that is oriented toward things that are temporary and of fleeting value, but gaining a life that is oriented toward the only things in life that really matter—love, connection, reconciliation, life with God. You're losing a life that is all about me-me-me, but gaining a life that is true and deep and meaningful.

Jesus's whole identity was about making the reign of God visible. It was visible in how he cared for other people, in his healing touch. It was visible in how he gave himself in service to others. It was visible in his generosity, his open welcome of all people. And when you lose a conventional little life in order to embrace that sort of identity and that sort of living, the reign of God will be visible in you too. The blessing of God on God's beloved creation will be visible in you too. The healing of God for this wounded human family will be visible in you too. The beauty of life with God will be visible in you too. Such beauty comes with a cost, of course, but it's the only life worth living. Thanks be to God. Amen.