

And Start Again At Your Beginnings

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Mark 8:27-38

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I don't know how closely you pay attention to sermon titles...but in case you were wondering, selecting them, picking them, coming up with them is not an exact science. Today's title is a quotation from Kipling's poem IF about risking it all, losing, and starting again at one's beginnings, but upon further reflection on this passage from Mark, it could have gone in a completely different direction. Our passage begins with Jesus and the disciples on their way to Caesarea Philippi and as one does when trying to entertain fellow travelers on a long road trip, Jesus pulls out the travel games. And as they travel along the question for discussion is kind of a first century version of 20 Questions or Who Am I or one of the apps one of my children downloaded on my phone, Akinator. 'Who do people say that I am?' Jesus asks. And then a follow up, who do you say that I am.

Okay, here is where I would like to stop for a second and reconsider the sermon title. I mean, let's think about the disciples for a second. This mystery person who they are not completely sure about has unexpectedly come into their lives, called them to drop what they were doing, leave what they thought was everything behind, and follow him. And they do. They leave it all behind. They follow. They stop, at least for the time being, being the fisherman they were for the first 30 or however many years of their lives. They follow Jesus from town to town, they don't understand his parables, they aren't real sure who he is, and they have abandoned or at least put their old lives on hold. We are eight chapters into the gospel of Mark (more than halfway) and the central people who will carry the burden of the gospel ministry are still trying to figure out who Jesus is...so how about this for an alternative sermon title...there is a 'fine line between faith and insanity'? Maybe too harsh, how about this, 'there is a fine line between faith and absurdity'? It would be one thing to drop it all, leave it all, and start over again by following Jesus if you were pretty clear that this person is the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world, but reading this roadside conversation here between Jesus and the disciples, they aren't really sure, they don't have all the answers, they haven't figured everything out, and they follow him anyway. That feels borderline absurd and crazy. I am always reminded of the Lutheran turned Roman Catholic Richard John Neuhaus' whose observation in his book, *Freedom for Ministry*, at least lends some support to this kind of sermon title. He reminds us that 'a very large proportion of those whom we call the saints of the Church were anything but models of [mental] health,' mental stability. The apostle Paul, 'St. Jerome, Martin Luther, Joan of Arc, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta---all thought and behaved in

ways that would readily get them certified' in a reputable health setting today.¹ Following this Messiah and trying to align our lives alongside his, especially when we walk by faith and not by certainty, may not always be the most stable, risk-free, benign way of life. The disciples are not even sure who this person is...sure Peter gets the right answer and says 'You are the Messiah,' but it almost seems like this is not something obvious that Peter declared, but a miraculous insight. We tend to lift Peter up as some kind of exceptionally gifted valedictorian-type for making this observation about Jesus rather than just someone who is stating what is obvious and self-evident, which confirms to me that for the most part the disciples were risking their lives, closing the door on their old lives, and embarking on something new, even though they were not completely certain of Jesus' identity and certainly not giving much thought to what it might mean for Jesus' life or for their own. A fine line between faith and absurdity, faith and insanity? I think so.

The second sermon title that might work here is 'Spiritual Amnesia.' For those of you who watch Ted Lasso you already know that the happiest animal in the world is the Goldfish...why? ...Because they only have a 10-second memory.' Jesus does say in verse 34 that 'if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross, and follow me.' Denying self, forfeiting rights, giving up what we believe we have earned does not feel very American to me. And it always feels like maybe Ted Lasso is right, maybe having a long memory won't help us here. I mean if those disciples would have remembered their homes back on the Sea of Galilee or their families or the fish fries and the happy memories of home, I wonder if they would have ever got around to answering the call to discipleship. Why give that all up? Having a long memory can hold us back I guess, and maybe having a long memory can be painful. But having a long memory is also what got Israel through exodus and exile, remembering that even in the darkness, even in a foreign land, even in the wilderness, they belonged to the Lord and Maker of Heaven and Earth, who would not be God without them. A long memory is what was rehearsed when the early Christian communities gathered together, and before breaking bread and sharing in the cup, remembered together, how God had come in the form of what who ate with sinners, turned water into wine, bringing joy and delight and life, and risen from the dead, continued to become manifest to his disciples in the breaking of the bread. To paraphrase the theologian Karl Barth, a memory of a grace is also a grace, and in the end, that is all we have to take with us in this life, memories of graces at various points and moments. Still, as we have already kind of discerned, there is a certain amount of spiritual amnesia that accompanies discipleship. Again, one of my favorite quotations about Christian discipleship comes from Barth. Here it is...he states: 'One never is a Christian, one can only become one again and again; in the evening of

¹ Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 79.

each day somewhat ashamed about one's Christianity of the day just over and in the morning of each new day glad that one may dare to be a Christian all over again, doing so with solace, with one another, with hope, with everything. The Christian congregation is of one mind in that it consists of real beginners.' That is what I mean about spiritual amnesia. Whatever knowledge, whatever virtue, whatever wisdom, whatever achievements, whatever failures, whatever accomplishments happened yesterday do not go into some kind of investment account to be drawn on later. Nothing can be banked. That does not mean that what we have done, what we have learned, what matters to us most, and what we carry with us are lost forever, but they don't earn us a better place in the line than anyone else. At the twilight of each day, all our failures as well as all our virtues are lifted up to God with our prayers of regret and our prayers of gratitude and we begin again the next day. And we begin again with Mark 8 and Jesus calling to us all over again, to try and become a Christian all over again, to leave what we thought was all that mattered and follow him into the world of commerce, politics, education, healthcare, neighborhood, family, school, to begin again and try to 'deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus.' The extent to which we failed to do this yesterday and the extent to which we were successful yesterday are over and done. Nothing in our past earned us into the automatic status of Christian today and nothing in our past prevents us from trying to become a disciple of Jesus Christ today. We hope to be blessed with a bit of spiritual amnesia so we can begin again.

So why this title over the others? Why 'And Start Again at Your Beginnings'? Well, perhaps we have already covered this a bit, successful Christian, expert disciple is a bit of an oxymoron. What we are trying to become in the life together of a Christian community is counter to pretty much what we are trying to become in the rest of life. In the classroom, we want students to become independent learners, but not in the Christian community. In the business world, we want leaders to distinguish themselves and achieve a certain level of success, but some of the most courageous disciples were rogues pretty much their whole life but in one moment of clarity were able to take a stand, declare the faith, or step into the fray for someone else when no one else would. In most professions, the more you know, the higher you move up the ladder. The more you know, the more expertise. We amass knowledge to become experts. But there are no experts in Christian discipleship. We are all beginners. We all have to start over each day and whatever expertise from before and whatever baggage we bring with us get us ahead or disqualify us today.

A long time ago, a Presbyterian minister stood at a baptismal font and as a small child was claimed by the waters of baptism, the minister remarked that the church is always one generation away from extinction. We are a fragile little enterprise whose hopes are wrapped up in the tiny hands of a baptized baby. But maybe, maybe our existence is even more fragile than even that minister imagined. Maybe the church is always living hand

to mouth and we are always, not just one generation away from extinction, but just one day away from extinction. Maybe we could all decide on Monday we were going to just stop taking this Messiah and his call to discipleship seriously, maybe just phone it in this week and ignore the needs of our neighbors, maybe punt on this talk about self-denial and reduce our lives to getting ours. But by a miracle of the Holy Spirit, that never, ever happens. In spite of not having all the answers, in spite of not being entirely sure about the full identity of this Messiah, in spite of not always having all the right information and expertise, just like those disciples long ago, there are people sitting among us, on our right and on our left and in between, who will begin again and try to follow Jesus Christ, today, tomorrow, and forever. Thanks be to God.