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Text: Mark 8:27-38  
Sermon: For Your Own Good  
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Here we are right in the middle of the gospel of Mark. This is the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter and chapter 9 begins with the transfiguration and then Jesus descent down the mountain toward his fate in Jerusalem and from then on, save a few teachings and healings, Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem and the events of his passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. For the first eight chapters of Mark we have been introduced to Jesus through his teachings, healings, some exorcisms, and his interactions with his disciples whom he called way back in the first chapter of Mark as he walks along the Galilee shoreline. So one might think that the disciples have a pretty good clue about who he is and what he is about at this point, having left their livelihoods and former lives behind to risk it on being a part of Jesus' life and coming kingdom. We are nearing the finish line of discipleship when all the loose ends should be wrapped up, the disciples should be successful high achievers by now and ready to graduate.

But here at the end of Mark chapter eight it is not entirely clear that the disciples have fully grasped who Jesus is at this point and we are pretty much at the end of the story. He begins by asking them who do people say that I am...and the verdict is not unanimous at all. John the Baptist or someone like that maybe...or Elijah...or maybe one of the prophets. He then asks and what about you, who do you say that I am? And only Peter is willing to answer, saying, 'You are the Messiah.' Finally, a disciples in Mark who gets the right answer. That does not happen too much here. In fact, Mark has a pattern of showing us that even when a disciple does achieve that feat they immediately swerve into a bigger misstep and blunder and misinterpretation about what it might mean that Jesus is the Messiah and what it mean that they are his disciples.

And it is not just them, not just Peter that struggles with what this all means, it is us, too. Jesus teaches that the Messiah will not gather an army and take back Israel, but that the Messiah will suffer and be rejected and look like a loser in the eyes of respectable society. No one will want to be associated with him. And Jesus is trying to explain that this is not an accident but how it is supposed to be, that the power of God is more vibrant, more true, and more faithful when disclosed in weakness rather than when we think we have found it in touchdowns, triumphs, and riding shotgun next to whoever holds power at any given moment. It's not just Jesus who talks like this. Paul said the same thing to the Corinthians along those lines, reminding another deeply flawed community of disciples that 'God

chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are...' But Peter wants nothing to do with a Messiah like this—and we don't either.

That's the problem with Peter and with us. We think our best happens when we are winning, when we are on top of the world, when we are winning, making partner, getting 17% returns on our investments, preaching home run sermons, but often our most faithful and courageous and impactful moments happen when we are questioning ourselves, when we are not sure what to do, when we have to ask for help, when we are worried about the next step, the next day, and what is next to come. Jesus know this; Jesus teaches this; Jesus lives this. Peter does not. Nor do we.

My first pastoral call was a solo pastor church in a small town in rural North Carolina made up of teachers, farmers, nurses, bankers, pickle plant employees, a doctor, a mix of working class and community professionals. Some of my early days in ministry I couldn't believe I got paid to study, read scripture, prepare sermons, and then there were days I couldn't believe I got paid because I had no idea what I was doing. One of those days was spent with a family whose 3<sup>rd</sup> grader was hit by a car one day after school and suffered traumatic brain injury. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to pray. I didn't know how to help. All I could do was keep showing up. All I could do was stumble through my prayers. All I could do was walk with this family through this crisis, not knowing what the future held, and not knowing if what I was doing was correct in the 'pastor manual.' But it was in those very moments of insecurity, uncertainty, and vulnerability where I became their pastor and we became church. Not at my triumphant ordination service or when I preached my best sermon, but in the heartache and heartbreak and holy moments and sleepless nights and contentious session meetings and late night phone calls. Those aren't supposed be the messianic moments though. They are supposed to come when the machinery of church or our lives is always humming along smoothly, never when we are wrestling with anything, struggling over something, or anxious or confused as to why doubt seems to be intertwined with our faith. We think a Messiah should only arrive on the mountaintops and take us to the triumphs even as at every turn Mark shows us something very different.

This past month I got word that a member of that first church I served died. On the right-handed power scale she was a negative score. She was disabled, married to an alcoholic, and pretty late in their lives they had a little boy. By the time I came to the church the father had died and she and her son lived in poverty in a mobile home that when I visited I could see the sunshine hitting the grass through the cracks in the floor. In case you haven't figured it out yet, I would not immediately self-identify as 'radical,' at least not the first word that comes to mind, but at one

point in my ministry Patricia was in a very bad car accident and was incapacitated and the clerk of session and I went to family court and got temporary joint custody of her son. It felt pretty radical or consequential, at least to me. Sometimes being church makes you do things you would never do in your own right mind. Sometimes you never know what kind of trouble being a disciple of Jesus Christ will get you in and under what circumstances his words these words will become our own... 'if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will save it.' Oh, Jesus, I didn't mean to get caught up in all that, I just thought I was doing something that would be good for me, not something that I thought would present me with any hard decisions or transform my life or make me value things differently than the typical priorities we live with. I didn't mean for all that Jesus.

Author and public theologian Marilynne Robinson was recently interviewed in The New York Times and now 80 she was asked this question: 'Do you find yourself thinking about heaven more as you get older?' Here was her response: 'Well, I belong to a particular branch of Protestantism (us!) that sort of discourages reflections on heaven in the sense that we can't know what it is and we can't know on what grounds we might or might not end up there.' That seems awfully arbitrary. Isn't she worried about not going there. Doesn't that give her anxiety. Isn't she worried about saving her life, preserving her life, making sure she's got a heavenly reservation or fire insurance or some assurance of divine favor and blessing. But she says this: 'I find that (not knowing) very satisfying. What it does is entirely refocus my attention to the world. When I die, I expect to be very impressed with what follows.' 'For those who want to save, secure, preserve, have certainty that they have the guarantee will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake, those who stop fixating on things they cannot control or cannot secure for themselves except through the grace of God, those who pour their lives into serving others, enriching others, encouraging others, those who can live self-forgetfully at times, those who lose their life for Christ's sake, will find it return to them a hundredfold.

Patricia, the woman who died from that former congregation, her obituary had this to say: 'Patricia had a servant's heart and was always willing to share with others, what she had. She had provided local transportation to many needing rides to doctors appointments, grocery shopping, or other necessary obligations.' I can remember getting frustrated with her for those rides, taking people for an errand or to buy groceries when I knew for a fact that she couldn't pay for her gas and she needed groceries and her bills paid as well. I can even remember at larger

community events, some muffled snickering by others that our church was burdened with someone like her. What an embarrassment.

By so many measurements, her life had little value. Not by a stewardship campaign or by social status or by even the most generous ways we could define success or achievement or power. On top of that, she could often be her own worst enemy, but in that community of faith she lived confidently with a sense that her humanity was a gift, that she had worth, and that she had something worthwhile to do with her life. In the life of that little Presbyterian Christian community, in ways I could scarcely believe, she knew that she belonged and that she was loved and she knew, in many ways, better than her own pastor did, how to lose her life for the sake of the gospel even when she barely had two pennies to rub together. In that Christian community where she belonged and in her own life, she knew what it meant to deny herself and take up her cross and follow. In her one could see God's leveling grace and an elevating justice. By serving others, she mattered, by being part of the body of Christ, she flourished. So may we all. And so may you find your life, not by trying to save it or preserve it or dole it out conservatively or check off some anxiety producing list, but by giving it away to others for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.