

February 28, 2021, Lent 2, Mark 8:31-38

"Some people, I swear, want to love God in the same way as they love a cow. They love it for its milk and cheese and the profit they will derive from it. Those who love God for the sake of outward riches or for the sake of inward consolation operate on the same principal. They are NOT loving God correctly; they are merely loving him for their own advantage."

This is a quote from a 14th century Dominican Monk named Meister Eckhart. When I came across this statement in my devotional reading one morning, it struck me as being very appropriate for summarizing what Jesus says to Peter in this morning's Gospel lesson. It seems to be a very good modern analogy for the statement Jesus uses to rebuke Peter that "you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!"

Peter had just declared his belief that Jesus was the Messiah. This seems to be a wonderful confession. While others have seen Jesus as John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets, Peter recognizes that he is, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah. But rather than rejoice at this magnificent revelation, Jesus orders the disciples not to tell anyone about who he is.

Why would Jesus want to keep his identity a secret? If I had come to earth to save humanity, I think that I would want as many people as possible to recognize who I was and what a wonderful thing I was here to do! How great it would be to be known as the one who would wipe out all suffering and injustice and lead my people gloriously into a life of peace and happiness.

But that may be exactly why Jesus didn't want the disciples to begin broadcasting the news of who he was. While they had the name right, they were greatly mistaken about the way in which Jesus intended to accomplish his mission. The disciples, at this point, were still stuck in the mindset of seeing the Messiah as that glorious and magnificent cow that they could love for their own advantage.

They thought that being in a close relationship with Christ meant that they would soon be freed from suffering and pain. They believed that by loving Jesus, they had an inside track to freedom and happiness. They had some of the same misguided notions that are still prevalent among some people today.

How many of us have known someone who professed to love God not because God first loved us and sent Jesus to die for us, but because they felt that by professing to love God, they could somehow win God's favor. They are loving God for their own advantage as Meister Eckhart so descriptively put it.

I have a friend from my "previous life", that is before we moved to the Seminary, who had gotten quite a reputation as a born again Christian. He was not shy about witnessing to others about accepting Jesus as his Lord and Savior. I must admit that I envied him a little for his ability to be a witness for Christ in the everyday world. I still respect him for his evangelism efforts, but after really listening to him for a while, I realized there seemed to be a flaw in his thinking about the reasons why one should love God and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior.

His entire reason for being a Christian seemed to be the avoidance of Hell at the time of his death. He believed that by doing and saying the right things in regard to his love of God, he was getting some kind of insurance policy against eternal damnation. He was looking for the milk of eternal peace in heaven and loved Christ simply as the cow that can provide that milk for him.

Peter, too, is stuck in the mindset that to follow Jesus is something one should be glad to do for one's own sake. He thinks that being a follower of Christ will be the way to avoid persecution and strife, because the Messiah is expected to triumphantly put an end to those things. That is why Peter

rebukes Jesus for saying that the Son of Man would have to undergo great suffering, be rejected by religious leaders, and be killed. Peter thinks that Jesus has it all wrong! Peter thinks that he knows better than Jesus what Jesus should do as the Messiah!! Is it any wonder that Jesus would call Peter "Satan" when Peter tries to convince Jesus that he knows what is best for Jesus to do.

Think back to the time when Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. Satan came to Jesus and tempted him to take the easy way out. Satan tried to convince Jesus that he knew better than Jesus what the Messiah should do! Now, Peter is, in a way, tempting Jesus in the same way. "Think about it Jesus. You are the Messiah, the triumphant deliverer of God's people. Why should you suffer and be rejected and be killed? You are here to wipe out evil, not be subjected to it."

It is as though Jesus suddenly has a flashback to that time in the wilderness, when he was tempted to succumb to the Devil's tests of his power. "Get behind me Satan!! I will not reject my Father's will and take the easy way out. I am not a cow you can love simply for what I can give you!!"

Find it interesting that Jesus rebukes Peter as he returns and looks at his disciples. It is almost as though he might be rubbing his chin, thinking about the possibilities, weighing his options. Then as he turns and sees those dedicated followers, he realizes the importance of his mission and the necessity of following God's plan for the salvation of God's people. "No, I won't do it. I love these people and all of humanity too much to think only of saving myself!! Get behind me, become follower, not my leader. Now Jesus returns to his ministry as he calls not only his disciples together, but he also speaks to the crowd. This is where we get the teaching of Jesus that is often referred to as the "Cost of discipleship."

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"

It is now decision time for those people in the crowd, and we are faced with the same decision ourselves day after day.

What Jesus is offering in this passage is an alternate way of life. I have attempted to somehow paraphrase the next statement of Jesus to give clearer meaning to what it says to us as we make those daily decisions in our lives.

If you are determined to save your life as it is, and continue to cling to what is important for humans, you will lose sight of what is important for the Godly life and so forfeit your chance of living that Godly life, but if you are willing to give up your human way of thinking about life for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel, you will save your recognition of those things which are important to your life in the Lord, and so be able to live that life daily.

I realize it's a little long, but it does show that we have choices to make and by those choices we can have new life in God through Christ Jesus. Even the location where this Gospel story takes place is symbolic of the fact that new life can be found by following Jesus. The location of Caesarea Philippi is on the boundary between the Holy Land, and what was Gentile territory.

As the disciples stand there, they can look back to where they have been, and look forward to the places they have yet to go. They could stop, go back, and continue to live the life they have known, or they can give up that life and go forward, following Jesus into a new and different life.

This is also both the decision and the promise we have before us every day. Go back to the human way of

living and thinking or follow Christ into an alternate way of life. To follow Christ, we are told that we must deny ourselves. I would like to place the emphasis here not on the word "deny", but on the word "selves". I like to think of it not as denying "ourselves" as much as denying "our Selves". This changes the perspective from a painful denial of the comforts we enjoy to another way of looking at how we are meant to deny our selves.

To deny our selves means to be free from our selves, to deny our human ways of thinking. To be free to think about Christ in a way that goes beyond that mistaken identity of Peter and the others and to see Christ as the one sent by God to give up his life for our sake, not as one who will destroy sin and suffering through might and confrontation,

but as one who showed his strength in the fact that he was willing to suffer, die, and be raised from the dead, so that we can believe his promise that we too will be raised to be with him at the end of the age.

When we think of self-denial, we often think of people like Mother Theresa. She is a beautiful example of one who denied human ways of thinking and gave her life to God through her work with the poor. Next to Christ, she seems to be the ultimate example of self-denial. Working and living among the poorest of the poor, she asked nothing for herself. She chose an alternate way of life based on showing Christ's love through her work.

But even this emphasis on giving doesn't do justice to the idea of denying our selves and giving up our lives for the sake of Christ. If we give all we can in an attempt to win God's favor, or because we believe that the more we give the more we get, we are still caught in that trap of loving God for what we can get from him.

What the Gospel of the Lord offers us is the chance to deny and give up those human notions of why we should love God. The life, and death, of Jesus Christ, which Peter didn't want to hear about, along with his resurrection,

offers us the choice of loving God for the sake of Jesus Christ because God first loved us so much that he was willing to let Christ die so that we might live. Quite the opposite of loving God like a cow, which is of very little use once it is dead.

As we go out into the world today, and every day, let us always be thankful that we are free to deny our selves and follow Jesus, with our minds set not on human things, but on the divine. Amen.