

The Pivot

Today we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of Mark's gospel, Chapter 8 of 16.

In the first half of his gospel, Mark gives us a glimpse of what God's kingdom looks like, as he breathlessly moves from town to town, as Jesus is everywhere healing the blind and throwing out demons and challenging the religious big shots.

And just as often as someone is made whole, someone else is misunderstanding everything that's happening right before their eyes.

What we want is magic and miracles and the laws of nature upended.

Jesus is about none of these things.

And it is this fundamental misunderstanding about our ways and God's ways, that gets us to where we are today, this pivot point in Mark's gospel.

Jesus is about to tell us, in his explosive confrontation with Peter, what the difference is between human religion and God's dream for humanity.

It's the difference between our best thinking -- and the wisdom that can come only when we surrender to God's best thinking.

It is perhaps the most crucial conversation in the entire Gospel, not just then, but today, because we live in a world drowning in human religion, religion that Jesus comes to eliminate.

Here's the thing.

We love to create religions.

Whether it's Zeus or Scientology and even significant swaths of what passes for Christianity – human religion is perhaps the most dangerous invention ever created, worse than nerve gas, worse than the bomb.

Human religion is all about human control that pretends to walk about with God's blessing.

And that is a most dangerous combination.

ISIS and Nazism and Nationalism are all human religions which seek to divide (or elevate) depending on whatever random criterion they may choose, from creed to skin color to place of birth.

We turn Christianity into human religion when we say that Jesus died not only **for us**, but **instead of us** – rather than coming to see that Jesus indeed died for us, but precisely so that we may also learn how to die: to ourselves, to our best thinking, to our love affair with controlling people, places and things.

And it's human religion that Peter has in mind when he confesses Jesus as the Messiah.

Peter knows the word "Messiah" – but he completely misses the meaning!

He's thinking power and prestige and glory...."my way" on steroids....and Jesus confronts this thinking with an anger and a rejection seen nowhere else in all of the gospels.

This kind of thinking: that religion is something we do rather than something we are, why, that kind of thinking Jesus utterly rejects.

That kind of thinking is what leads to putting on the robe of the "pious finger pointer who loves to accuse the sinner, it creates people who prefer the security of ritual and magic and the clubroom to the

insecurity" of mercy and kindness and grace. Jennings, *The Insurrection of the Crucified*, 127. Modified.

"Get behind me Satan!"

Because this kind of thinking is indeed Satanic.

It seeks to replace mercy and forgiveness and grace that can only be born out of suffering and surrender, with privilege and power and prestige that come from looking out for number one.

Peter, like I so often do, wants to **lead** Jesus rather than follow him.

I try to lead Jesus when I secretly whisper to myself that it's naive wishful thinking to love your enemies, to forgive wrongs, to refuse to kill, to welcome the stranger.

I try to lead Jesus when I use every trick in the book to tame the unpredictably wild message of the gospel, when I spend my precious hours feathering my own comfortable nest, when the bum at the corner is dismissed by me as that bum at the corner, rather than a beloved child of God; and Jesus is having none of it!

Instead, he tells us loud and clear, "get **behind** me, and **follow** me to a place that you cannot imagine, a place where you jump first, for only then will the net appear."

And if you think that Jesus makes these demands only on his inner circle, folks like the clergy or monks or nuns, whelp, you gotta another think coming.

Because while he chews out Peter in private, when it's time to help us see what God's true dream is for all of us, he brings in the crowd, gathering us all in tight, and he explains.

It's about the cross.

Another badly misunderstood word that we have used and abused over the centuries.

Taking up our cross isn't about Lenten sacrifices of chocolate or red wine.

It isn't inventing ways to suffer, or even cheerfully bearing life's foibles; and it certainly doesn't mean that if you're in an abusive relationship that you stay.

No, if you're in an abusive relationship, leave!

Taking up the cross means to take the side of the poor and the marginalized; to, on a daily and sometimes hourly basis, surrender our obsessions with controlling people, places and things.

It means embracing the power of non-violence, and the frightening challenge that non-violence creates: to place my body over yours as the club swings down.

It means rejecting the jingoistic hyperbole that is even now closing our borders and denying basic human dignity to our sisters and brothers, solely to protect the privileges and wealth we have come to enjoy, often at the expense of the very people and cultures we now so fervently bar from our shores.

This is the difference between human religion and God's dream for humanity.

We create religions that categorize and criminalize — all with the blessing of our man-made god.

But Jesus insists that God's dream for humanity is that we rediscover that we are each and every one of us sisters and brothers of one God, the source of every slice of bread, of every cup of water.

Meaning, nothing in this world his MINE — it's all God's — meaning — everything belongs to everyone, a truth many of our island people know, to the great chagrin of most westerners.

Yes, I know.

Roll your eyes!

But isn't that precisely what Jesus is saying today?

"If any want to be my disciples, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.

The price of following Jesus is the price of giving away our life.

"But here's the thing: we tend to think that life is something you go out and get, or earn, or buy, or win.

But it turns out that life is like love, it can't be won or earned or bought, it can only be given away.

And the more you give away, the more you have." David Lose. Modified.

It's a truth discovered by every person who has ever traveled to some distant land with the intention of "helping out" the "less fortunate."

Every one of these folks returns with the joy of discovering that in seeking to give, one receives unimaginable gifts in return.

It's a life of subtraction.

Subtracting my need to be the most important person in the room.

Subtracting my need to be in charge.

Subtracting my compulsion to achieve security and safety.

And as we subtract these things something begins to happen.

The contentment that eludes us as we chase after security – when we surrender the chase – that contentment appears in our homes.

The peace we so desperately try to obtain through controlling others arrives – in the letting go of control.

The joy that seems to be all tied up with money in the bank – invades our lives in a way more profound and lasting than any think possible – when money ceases to be the focus of our lives.

G.K. Chesterton once said that “paradox is the truth standing on its head in order to get our attention.”

And so Mary is both virgin and mother.

Jesus is both human and divine.

And the way to real life, is to give our life away.

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