

Thy Will Be Done
Sermons for the Lenten Season

God's Will and Self Denial
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

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Have you ever entered a relationship and later thought, “This may have been a mistake”? It may have been a new job. At first, it looked like the perfect match for you. But the deeper you got into it the more you began to realize that it wasn’t the perfect match. Maybe you didn’t like the nature of the work. Maybe the culture of the company was not right for you. Maybe you were not compatible with the other workers.

Or maybe it was a romantic relationship. From a distance, it looked like a perfect match. She was intelligent, charming, attractive — everything you were looking for. But six months into the relationship, it looked much differently. You were beginning to think, “Maybe I’ve made a mistake.”

Could that be happening to Peter in our text from Mark 8? At one point, it felt like the perfect match. Peter had become the leading disciple. Everything was going so well until Jesus called him out and named him as Satan.

This second Sunday of Lent presents us with a fascinating and challenging text. The lectionary presents the text in two sections. In the first section, Jesus taught just the disciples. In the second section, he taught the crowd and the disciples. I’m going to suggest that we need to make it three sections and include what happened immediately before.

Mark says that Jesus was in the village of Caesarea Philippi. He asked his disciples this question, “Who do the people say that I am?”

It was an important question. The disciples had been out mingling with the people in the village of Caesarea Philippi, and Jesus wanted to know what the people were saying about him.

The disciples said that some of the villagers thought he was John the Baptist, whom King Herod had put to death. So some were thinking that Jesus might be John the Baptist come back to life. Others thought he might be the Old Testament prophet Elijah. He never died, remember? He was caught up into the heavens by a whirlwind. Some were thinking Jesus might be Elijah come back. Or maybe he was one of the other Old Testament prophets. Those were the rumors floating around the village.

Then Jesus turned the question directly to the disciples: “But who do you say that I am?”

It may have been the most important question Jesus ever asked his disciples. Then and now. Who do *you* say that I am?

Peter was the one who answered. Peter appears to have been a leader among leaders. A bit impulsive at times perhaps. But he was a leader. He answered rightly, “You are the Messiah.”

Pause for a moment. I want to admit up front that this is not in the text, but here’s what I think may have happened right after Peter made that declaration. Peter, James, and John started high-fiving each other, and they all started congratulating Peter: “Way to go, Peter! Good answer! Man, I wish I had thought of that.” It was as good as any locker room celebration. In Matthew’s account, Jesus himself actually congratulated Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!” And then Jesus gave Peter the keys of the kingdom. A very big moment!

Here’s what I think Peter may have been thinking: “This is a good relationship! This is a good match. I like this Jesus. And he obviously likes me too. Why, I think we could go far together.”

How quickly things can change. Immediately after Peter finished high-fiving the other disciples, Jesus began to teach them about what was coming. He would undergo “great suffering,” he said. He would be

rejected by the religious leadership. And then the bombshell: he would be killed. He even claimed that after three days he would rise again.

It was preposterous! Peter couldn't let that happen. Things were going too well. The villagers thought he was some prophet come back to life. Peter had made the ultimate declaration: "You are the Messiah." That meant great things were ahead for all of them.

If Jesus didn't mess it up.

Peter was a leader, right? And a bit impulsive, yes, but a leader nevertheless. Notice what he did. Mark uses strong language here to describe Peter's actions: "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."

Here's the picture I see in my mind. Peter takes Jesus by the arm, drags him over to a corner alone, puts his finger in Jesus' face, and says, "This must not happen! Stop this talk of suffering and death!"

That's a "rebuke." It's a strong word.

But notice what happened. Jesus then did it. He "rebuked" Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Carlyle Marney was one of the great preachers out of our tradition. He was pastor of the Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte. He calls this the most terrible personal rebuke Jesus ever delivered. Here's how Dr. Marney describes it:

Get behind me, Satan; you are an offence to me.

Get behind me, Adversary; you are a stumbling block.

Go down, Satanos; you are a scandal, a trap, a threat to break my back.

Hush, Simon: you are a scandal to my scandal; you are a threat to the Cross! (The Carpenter's Son, p. 75)

"Maybe I've made a mistake," Peter may have wondered. "Maybe we're not as compatible as I thought we were."

Jesus' rebuke of Peter set the stage for what is arguably Jesus' greatest teaching on what it means to be a disciple. Then and now. Jesus turned his attention to the crowd and gave the crowd and his disciples this hard truth about discipleship.

If any want to become my follower, they've got to do three things:

*Deny your self,
Take up your own cross,
And then come and follow.*

If you want to save your life, you've got to lose it.

They are in proper order. *Deny self.* Not deny yourself something you want. This was not a Lenten discipline of giving up something. No, there is not direct object. Deny yourself. Not hate yourself. Not hurt yourself. Deny yourself. Your images of your self. Your ideas of your self. Let that all stand corrected alongside the image of the One who stood before them, Jesus the Messiah.

Take up your cross. The cross bar that one carried to the place of crucifixion—that's what he was referring to. Jesus would do so. He would carry his own cross bar to the place called The Skull. But not only Jesus. His followers had to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice too.

Then come and follow. Only then.

Did you know that when you started this relationship? It's not just about potluck suppers, fellowship, and kum ba yah. It is a radical call to a way of life that reinterprets greatness, power, and the meaning of life. If you want to find life, life that matters, that fills something deep within, lose your life in the way of Jesus Christ. Peter finally did. This encounter in Mark 8 awakened Peter to the true potential of their relationship. They did go far together. Tradition says that Peter died a martyr, crucified upside down because he didn't feel worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus. He was finally able to pray, "Thy will be done." How about you?

Closing Prayer

Awaken us, Lord, to the call to deny self, take up our cross, and follow. Amen.