



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Straight Talk

A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

March 8, 2009

Second Sunday in Lent (Year B)

Mark 8:27-38

Our oldest child, Connall, was about 3 years old when he made a statement that demonstrated a wisdom beyond his years regarding that existential struggle we, as humans have in our relationship to God. He had been doing something (I don't remember what now) that needed to be stopped or redirected in some way. Maybe it was playing with his toys, or watching television or interacting with his sister in a 'brotherly' sort of way – whatever it was, our effort to change what he was doing touched a nerve. And, after a couple of exchanges back and forth, he cried out in utter frustration: *“But I want to do what I want to do.”*

The candid way in which Connall described the struggle he was having between obeying us and doing what he wanted to do struck Patrick and I immediately. And while I'm certain that at the time our response included just a touch of sarcasm, 'yeah, join the club, Connall!', it's also a phrase that has come back to me again and again as life has unfolded around me and I've watched and recognized within myself, that same sentiment expressed, albeit in different ways.

“I want to do what I want to do.” It is indeed our nature to follow our own counsel, to nourish our own passions; *to do what we want to do*. And this doesn't seem to be too much of a problem until what we want to do clashes with what we've said we believe.

Today is the second Sunday in Lent – a season for honest reflection and study about our own relationship and commitment to the one we call *The Christ*. This is precisely what we find Peter doing in our passage from Mark. At this point, we are about halfway through the gospel and Mark takes us down a road that would surprise us, if we weren't already familiar with Jesus' story. It surely caught the disciples off guard, as Jesus talked with them on their way to Caesarea Philippi. It started out as a simple enough conversation, with Jesus asking what seems to be an innocent question:

‘so who do people think I am?’

The disciples eagerly shared what they'd heard people say: “John the Baptist!” “A Prophet!” “Elijah.” But then the conversation changed; it became more personal and clearly more at stake:

‘and what about you – who am I to you?’

And that's when Peter says it – the confession of faith in Jesus the Messiah that has been lifted up over and over again:

‘You are the Messiah.’

The disciples were called and taught by Jesus; ministered with him and traveled throughout Galilee. They had seen a lot, and for Peter, what they saw in Jesus' power and ministry moved him to confess his faith in Jesus as that long awaited Messiah. His con-

fession is the turn onto a new road that leads to a deeper and *riskier* understanding of the gospel of grace.

Last week Pastor John preached on a passage in which Mark described three significant events in Jesus' life in three very short paragraphs: his baptism, temptations in the wilderness and entrance into ministry. As we heard, Mark's style of writing frequently gives us briefer accounts of events that might receive more detail in other gospels. With that in mind, Mark really gets our attention as we read what happens after Peter's confession of faith, because he has gone to great lengths to capture Jesus' explanation of what Peter's words mean.

With what must have felt like excruciating detail to Peter, Jesus tells them what will happen next: the *suffering, rejection and crucifixion that will take place for Jesus, the Messiah*. The details are more than Peter can bear, and in a bold move, he pulled Jesus aside from the group, scolding him for putting such humiliating, graphic images in the minds of the disciples.

You see, Peter had a fairly traditional understanding of the Messiah's role. He expected that the Messiah was the one who would take his rightful place as the leader of Israel, banishing the Roman occupiers, cleansing the temple, ushering in a new era for the people. The words Jesus was using - *this language of suffering and crucifixion* was reserved for criminals and political enemies—but not for the anointed one, the savior. You can almost hear Peter cry out in the frustration of these two images clashing:

"I want to believe what I want to believe!"

This language, this new picture of what's going to happen, didn't fit with what he expected.

As if this weren't enough to bear, Jesus continued to interrupt Peter's vision of the future, calling on his disciples to join him: to take up their cross, a symbol of shame and humiliation and follow him down this road of suffering and pain. We can understand Peter's distress – his anguish over what he was hearing in Jesus' straight talk about being a follower.

I'm reminded of the 1998 film, *Pleasantville*. Like the name of the movie implies, Pleasantville is a place where life is good; everything goes as planned and every basketball shot goes into the hoop. Set as a black-and-white, 1950's sitcom, Pleasantville seems idyllic until reality sets in in the form of two *real-life* contemporary teenagers, who bring with them the hard choices and tough struggles of their lives. The film slowly moves from black-and-white to color as reality takes over this 'perfect' town and the characters begin to face a world where things are not easy or certain.

Followers of Jesus Christ are compelled to take this one step further. Not only are we called upon to face what life offers us faithfully, but sometimes we're called upon to actually make choices that put us in hard places. Jesus intentionally entered places where a hostile audience awaited him, and responded to challenging questions with a provocative truth. He didn't move out of the way to avoid a confrontation; he didn't use words to soften his message. Rather, he walked into his purpose. Long before Good Friday, he was carrying his cross.

"I want to do what I want to do; I want to believe what I want to believe!"

Our culture constantly feeds us a diet of self-fulfillment and entitlement that makes us easy prey to Peter's theology of what's to come. Even in some Christian circles, the message is: 'if we do what God wants us to, things will go well for us.' But this Christian teaching, this cultural norm flies in the face of Jesus' message:

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross.'

It doesn't get much clearer than that. Talking about God's love is important and living out of the grace which this love makes possible is imperative. But doing everything right, following all the rules, loving Jesus: *none of this guarantees things will go easy for us.*

Somewhere along the way, Peter finally, "got it." Not quickly and certainly not without resistance, but he got it and his confession that Jesus is the Messiah showed forth in a ministry that history tells us bore much fruit, but history also tells us, led to a cross. In the midst of all he did, however it was his experience of and love for Jesus nourished him and equipped him to take up the crosses that life presented.

Somewhere along the way, we get it as well. We gather together in this place to profess our faith in Jesus Christ, to call him our Savior and say 'yes' to following him. In just a few minutes we're going to gather around the baptismal font and welcome Aaron Leggett into the family of faith through the Sacrament of Baptism. Together with John and Alayne, together with Rachel and Sarah, we will profess our faith and make promises to teach Aaron about God's love for him in Jesus Christ. And we're going to promise to teach him to follow Christ – to deny himself and take up his cross.

From where we sit this morning, it's hard to envision what that promise will mean in the day to day privilege of being his family of faith. And, we can't know what the crosses in his life will be. But we do know and we must understand the promises made here are profound – both for Aaron and for us. When we profess Jesus Christ as our Savior, we enter into the very conversation Peter and Jesus had that day. Like Peter, we are compelled to examine our experience *with* and relationship *to* Jesus, asking the hard questions and discerning our willingness to follow Jesus to the place discipleship leads. And, again like Peter, we are invited into the conversation that lifts up the life giving power of God's love, and an emptying of self born of the same deep love. Then, with God's help, our cry may echo Jesus' words,

'not what I want but what you want.'