

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

TWO TAKES ON PEACE AND JUSTICE

Mark 8:27-38

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the

glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

DIAGNOSIS: Peace and Justice [take one]

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Crusading for Peace and Justice*

Even though Peter is supposedly correct in identifying Jesus as the Messiah, in no time at all it seems he betrays that he too is stuck on the same “prophet” identity that the people had taken Jesus to be. The messiah Peter and the people envision would carry on the prophetic tradition of championing peace and justice, would be a mighty crusader who “makes things right”; definitely NOT someone who falls victim to the world’s tyrants and suffers and dies! With this ideal in mind, its no wonder Peter rebukes Jesus for such a gaffe. We’re no different really. More than ever, WE want to “make a difference” in the world, to do what’s right, to spread peace and justice, and we want, in fact we EXPECT our messiah, our Jesus, to be 100% behind us. So we crusade hard, both as individuals and as congregations, working to make our world a better place. This priority shows up in how we organize our congregations, in our mission and vision statements, and so on. Sometimes, we even assume that peace and justice is the whole reason Jesus came to earth. Golly, do we want to help him!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Just Being Human*

But Jesus abruptly and harshly rebukes Peter: “Get behind me Satan,” he snaps. “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (v. 33). “Human” preoccupation (such as Peter’s, and let’s face it, ours too) looks outward and sees the world’s problems as being caused by OTHER people who just need to shape up and change (and, of course, WE are ready to help). “Human things” follow the script of the Law, assuming

that a change in behavior and living up to the standards are all that is needed to set things right. Jesus just needs to show everyone how to do it. True, in this script, there are winners and losers, but peace and justice crusaders, definitely on God's side, are guaranteed winners. (God should give us gold medals!) Little do we realize that such arrogance betrays how we've already succumbed to Satan's temptation-to take God's place. "I'll do it MY way" our hearts sing (putting Frank Sinatra's song in present tense), and unwittingly, we morph into self-trusters.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Peace and Justice Boomerangs*

A "divine" preoccupation, on the other hand, looks inward and recognizes that the world's problems come not from the outside, but from INSIDE human hearts. And wouldn't you know, the heart of the problem in hearts is exactly its self-trusting behavior! Such behavior transgresses the very first commandment crusader hearts are so enamored with, to fear, love and trust God above all things. In an ironic twist, the Law boomerangs on self-trusters, both judging and condemning them for their failure to trust God. "Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? For those who want to save their life will lose it" (v. 36). What a shock! Instead of gaining his favor, crusader hearts end up forsaken by God: He respects their choice and simply bows out of their lives. That's hell.

PROGNOSIS: Peace and Justice [take two]

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Peace and Justice Satisfied*

Thank God, Jesus' mind is on "divine things" and knows that self-trusting losers need a much greater messiah than they could ever envision. They need a Messiah who will get them out of their self-made hell! And thank God, Jesus was willing to be

such a Messiah, even when he understood that that role demanded he go to hell himself! “Divine things” reveal a love in which God overrides his own Law, not by abrogating it, but by succumbing to and fulfilling it. Peter, and we, watch the divine denouement unfold: just as Jesus predicted, he is rejected and killed by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes (v. 31), i.e., the upholders of the Law. With intense suffering, he absorbs the entire brunt of the Law—even to the point of God-abandonment, hell (15:34). When Jesus “gave a loud cry and breathed his last” (15:37), the Law was satisfied. It had had the last say...that is, until Easter morning when God completely overrode it by raising Jesus (again, as predicted, v. 31).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Following Jesus*
As the curtain comes down on this drama, Peter/ we can’t help but be overwhelmed by the astounding mercy and forgiveness these events convey. It melts our hearts: We recognize that it is not OTHERS who need fixing, it is WE ourselves! WE need a messiah. We fall on our knees and beg Jesus, “Lord, save us!” Sometimes that’s called repentance, sometimes it’s called dying to our selves, sometimes it’s called taking up a cross. Painful though it is, it is a glad dying which then becomes a glad following, based on the certainty that Jesus already has been on the cross, and when we join him, he promises he’ll grab hold of us and take us right through the pain of death to new life.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Peace and Justice Happens*

With hearts morphed from self-trusters to Jesus-trusters, we follow Jesus, like Peter, wherever he goes, even if that involves heading straight into someone else’s hell! But our goal is not to change those hell-bent losers, but to RETRIEVE them from their hells. We offer them the same way out we’ve followed, namely, taking hold of Jesus and letting HIM retrieve us. Instead of singing “I’ll do it MY way,” we recognize that God

has accomplished things HIS way, by forgiving one sinner at a time. Notice the fallout from such changed hearts: spontaneously they seek to relieve the suffering and injustice they see in the world. Instead of being IMPLEMENTERS of peace and justice, Jesus-followers are God's INSTRUMENTS (think Saint Francis of Assisi) toward that end. Priorities change: Congregations understand that their first and foremost mission is to feed and bathe the world's losers with God's mercy and forgiveness, one sinner at a time.

Writer's addendum: You could just as easily replace the "peace and justice" agenda addressed above with the "morality" agenda. I mean by this the rationale that the world would be a much better place if we could just make others behave more morally, especially when it comes to their sex lives, so let's legislate it.