

## **September 16, 2018 Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan

Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

### **GOSPEL**

**Mark 8:27-38**

The holy gospel according to Saint Mark, the eighth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>27</sup>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?” <sup>28</sup>And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup>He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>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.”

<sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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 life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>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.”

The gospel of the Lord.  
**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Our religious tradition...

and our ancestors in Jewish faith have a beautiful love affair with  
Wisdom.

And I don't mean in a Post-Enlightenment sort of way  
where Wisdom is something to be conquered or tamed...  
under our control...

so that we might control more of the world or our own lives...

Wisdom is like a dance partner...

and make no mistake...

If we try to lead, we'll get our toes stepped on.

But then, when I hear how Wisdom speaks

in the opening chapter of the book of Proverbs today,

I'm actually reminded of a sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

And if you'll forgive some early twentieth century affectations of  
speech,

I'll read it for you:

She writes in the voice of a disrespected wife:

Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!

Give me back my book and take my kiss instead.

Was it my enemy or my friend I heard,

"What a big book for such a little head!"

Come, I will show you now my newest hat,

And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink!

Oh, I shall love you still, and all of that.

I never again shall tell you what I think.  
I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly;  
You will not catch me reading any more:  
I shall be called a wife to pattern by;  
And some day when you knock and push the door,  
Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy,  
I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.

Just like Wisdom in Proverbs,  
    who speaks almost like a street preacher  
        being ignored by the crowds walking by...  
she threatens to leave and not come back.

If we want to treat her like a dog,  
    we can whistle after her when we find her gone...  
        sort of like another woman's story we just heard last week –  
        sort of like the Syrophoenician Gentile woman  
who Jesus called a dog.

Perhaps today we have an even less respectful relationship to Wisdom  
    than they did in the ancient near East or the 1920's...  
        though I never think we'd admit it.

We think we are so knowledgeable and in control.

    We want to domesticate Wisdom and Understanding...  
Maybe we want make them our pets instead of our partners or  
teachers...  
    to say and do what we want...

We want neat answers to wickedly complex questions.

    We want facts that reinforce our worldviews.

        We don't want to be too uncomfortable most of the time.

This is why I love the undomesticated, wild,  
and mystical picture of Wisdom that is painted in the Psalmody:

Wisdom is a reflection of eternal light,  
a spotless mirror of the working of God, an image of God's  
goodness.

Although she is but one, she can do all things,  
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;  
in every generation she passes into holy souls  
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;  
for God loves nothing so much  
as the person who lives with wisdom.

She is more beautiful than the sun,  
and excels every constellation of the stars.

Compared with the light she is found to be superior,  
for it is succeeded by the night,  
but against wisdom evil does not prevail.  
She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other,  
and she orders all things well.

What is it like, to live and dance with a Wisdom like that?

What would it look like to live in a world more willing to be in that  
wild waltz?

Our desire to domesticate the Wisdom and Power of God  
is almost as old as Wisdom herself, of course.

And we also hear it in Mark's gospel today.

When Peter refuses to accept the wild, winding path  
that Jesus is about to walk.

Peter has envisioned a powerful and victorious Messiah...

an anointed king...

here to conquer and overthrow

the forces of this world that have their boots on the necks of his people.

But Jesus makes it plain

that this is not a journey where power and control will belong to us...

at least not in the way we may think or hope.

It is interesting that Jesus has taken his friends to Caesarea Philippi to have this conversation.

This was a place where there was said to be a famous gate to Hades...

a passage to the underworld...

where pagan gods would cross over and return again.

It was a place full of idols.

It was a place where Jesus being John or Elijah

returned from the underworld might be easy to imagine.

*(<https://corydriver.com/2018/09/11/ordinary-time-17-gaining-the-world-and-losing-your-soul/>)*

It is also a place where Jesus' words about dying and rising again

would have sounded like a departure from his Jewish identity...

closer to these pagans surrounding them.

It makes sense that Peter would have been unsettled...even scandalized...

and not just because he wasn't describing the Messiah's hoped-for victory...

Everything about this future Jesus describes feels

wrong and frightening to Peter.

And if we really sit with it, it probably still feels pretty frightening today.

What are we to do with Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow...  
when he has just told us that the place where he is going...  
and where we will be going if we follow...is death?

Do we make this a metaphor...make it more tame?

Or do we believe that to follow Jesus we might truly lose our lives...?

Or a great deal of what matters to us?

It is no small thing to follow Jesus.

It is not safe.

It is not simple.

It is not something we will be able to control or fully understand.

And...and...when we do...

we will also discover the life

that we didn't even know was there to gain

when we let go of what we call life.

Luther Seminary professor, Dr. Karoline Lewis,

suggests that one of the reasons Jesus asks us who we say that he is...

is because he knows that, when we do, we will also reveal who we believe we are.

*(<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5220>)*

If we hold him up as the one we follow,

as the highest ideal for which we could reach in our lives...

the one who lived the truest most precious life

that there has ever been...  
then when we say who we believe he is...  
we say who we are...or at least who we hope to be.

On the other hand,  
we very often we make Jesus in our own image, too,  
to allow ourselves to be comfortable with who we are now.

And Jesus *does* choose to inhabit our life  
so we will always know that he is close to us,  
with us through everything...even to the point of death.

And yet, he does not come so close  
so that we can see him in the mirror  
when we brush our teeth in the morning.

He does not come close simply to be like us as we are now.

His life holds within it the tension of the fullness of humanity...  
and the fullness of the very Being of God.

His presence will always be holding out a hand onto a cosmic dance  
floor

where we will become something new...  
where we will confront what it is to not be in control...  
and experience that not only as something to fear...  
but also as liberation  
from the burden that comes  
of making ourselves the gods of our lives or our world.

In this dance we see that

“Wisdom is [indeed] a reflection of eternal light,  
a spotless mirror of the working of God, an image of God’s  
goodness.”

Who do we say that Jesus is?

He is the one we will call Messiah...still without knowing what we mean...

He is the one who will show us what Messiah really means...

what life is there to be gained by laying our lives down...

by setting aside the things that tether us to life as we know it...

so that we can join in the dance.

Thanks be to God. Amen.