

## *Discipleship Essentials*

*James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38*

Have you ever had one of those weeks that you would like to erase and start all over again? That's been my week this week. I've just realized that in the scriptures, we read, in the Mark passage, the scripture for next week. So I fixed that one, missed the other one, and there you have it. So if the passage I'm speaking about today doesn't quite fit with what you read...you'll know why. But I think in some ways, it speaks to James as well and the issue of mistakes. We all make mistakes, and that was mine this week. So there you go.

However, over the last several weeks, we have been exploring questions that help us to form our faith. We have been asking questions like, why do we worship? What is a faith community? What does it mean to be rich in faith? The scripture today that I'm going to speak about invites us to explore the penultimate question: who is Jesus, and what is a disciple? Jesus asked only two questions of his disciples in the passage from Mark 8, when he said: "Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?"

The disciples then shared with Jesus what other people had been saying. They said, "You are John the Baptist, because you are bringing people to faith. So you're just like John; you're baptizing people as well." They also said that people were saying that he is just like Elijah. This great well-known prophet who was speaking things that really made people think; that changed their outlook on life. Jesus then, though, turned to his chosen followers, the disciples, and said, "Who do *you* say that I am?" And it was Peter the disciple who was bold and answered, "Jesus, you are the Messiah. You are the Chosen One of God." At first read of this passage, it would seem that the disciples had been listening very well. They did well. They knew exactly what other people said, they answered Jesus' question perfectly. But when I think about it, I don't think that Jesus was truly into titles. Who is Jesus, anyways? Is Jesus human? Is Jesus divine? Is Jesus both human and divine? Would any one title capture the essence of who Jesus is?

When we are in relationship with one another, we need to look past such titles, for they are not the sum total of who we are. It would be easy for me to say to someone else, "I'm Christian." And yet, my actions might not necessarily align with what that title means, and I'm sure we've all experienced that at some point in our life. We need to look beyond the title and dig deeper

into what a person values; what shapes their behaviour; what is their vision; are they trustworthy; and do they have integrity? Do they treat people with dignity and compassion?<sup>1</sup> When I think about Jesus, we saw that Jesus not only taught, not only was he the Son of God...he healed, he stood up for people who were being mistreated, he shared all that he had with others, and he showed them compassion and love.

The reality is we can't know every single thing about every single person. Not even the people who are closest to us. But we do hold words and actions in balance with each other. In order to get a true sense of who someone is, we need to think not only about what they say, but also see what they do. Those should be congruent with one another.

Jesus, in this passage, went on to teach the disciples that he, the Son of God, must undergo great suffering. That Jesus proclaimed that he will be rejected by religious leaders. He will be killed, and he will rise again. Peter then decided, thinking himself very wise, took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Got mad at him for saying such things. Why would Jesus say this when he is the Son of God, when he is the Messiah, when he has the power to fix things? Why would he say that he is going to allow religious leaders to kill him and then rise again? Jesus then, in turn, rebukes Peter, letting him know that his mind is focused on human things, not divine. Peter, in that moment, was turning away from God when he thought he was trying to help Jesus.

Following Jesus does not mean that all will be well in our lives. Jesus is upfront about the cost of discipleship. We are being called to follow Jesus, who will stand up in the face of oppression and injustice, and we are being called to live according to God's will, not our human desires. All too often, we bring our humanity to our relationship with Jesus. We see Jesus as someone who will support our human wants and desires. Jesus will help us to become what we want to become. What does Jesus mean when he says that we are called to lose our lives in order to be saved? I believe that this is a call to turn our focus outward. To not only serve ourselves. We are being called to serve the world and love it as Jesus does. As I said, Jesus was upfront about his journey. He said that he would lose his life for the sake of God's people, and the people who followed would then be called to pick up that mantle and continue the work of God in the world. Jesus wasn't called to do this all by himself. That is why he called people to follow him. That is why he commissioned the disciples to go out into the world to teach, to heal, to stand up for justice, and to serve those in need. In the passage from Mark, Jesus is demanding that we make a decision. Will we follow Jesus? Will we follow Jesus to the places where Jesus will go, that might make us uncomfortable?

In the United Church of Canada, we believe in the priesthood of all people. We believe that every single person is called to discipleship, that we all have a purpose to serve in this world,

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<sup>1</sup> Harry B. Adams, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 68.

and that the key to a healthy community of faith lies in a clear sense of that purpose where all people participate, not simply as members, but as disciples. Being a follower of Christ is a call to discipleship. So what is that? What is the essence of the life of a disciple? Discipleship is first and foremost a calling, giftedness and training. It is not a title, nor is it a position. Over the last several weeks, we have been reminded that we are not to show partiality to any one person. By partaking in Communion, as we will today, we are reminded that we are one body, with so many gifts. And we must share these in communion with one another – both friends and strangers, Gentiles and Jews. Robertson-Wesley thrives when we grow in faith. When we continually seek to deepen our relationship with God and our understanding about how we are called to live out our faith.

Jesus wants us to build up the community of faith, and therefore we need to check in with ourselves. To determine if we are acting like Peter and turning our attention to human desires, the human realm...or whether we are focused on divine matters. We need to remember to let our words pass through those three gates that I mentioned a few weeks ago before speaking. Peter may have benefited from this practice before he spoke to Jesus if he had asked himself: “Is what I’m about to say true? Is it necessary? And is it kind?” We need to seek the ways of wisdom. “Becoming wise means learning how to think carefully and act virtuously in complex situations, where one is tempted to think simplistically and act recklessly. One becomes wise by learning to integrate one’s thoughts, will and actions towards one’s context in faithful ways.”<sup>2</sup>

As I’ve started with, none of us are perfect. I’m number one. We will all make mistakes, for we truly are human. Jesus was human and divine, and that is why we strive to be better in this world. We are human like Peter, and there are times when we say things and do things that do not live up to what God has called us to do and be. But we need not be afraid, and we need not give up. We simply need to ask for forgiveness. We need to then accept the grace that God freely offers us. We then need to remember to offer grace to one another when we also make mistakes. For when we admit our mistakes, that’s when we can grow and change and learn to be as God would want us to be. That is our goal today, and we need to rest in the promise that God loves us unconditionally. But we also need to strive to turn towards God, and not simply rely on our human desires, wants and needs. For being Christian is not a title; being Christian is about living love in this world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Douglas *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 62 & 64.