



Following a loser?
James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38
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A rabbi is walking along a road. He is deep in thought and instead of making a right at the fork in the road he walks on the path to the left. Suddenly he hears someone call out to him, “Who are you? What are you doing here?” Shaken from his thoughts he sees that he is now standing in front of a fort with a Roman soldier calling out from the wall. The rabbi answers with a question, “How much do they pay you to ask me those two questions?” The soldier replies, “One denarius.” The rabbi answers, “Come follow me, I will pay you double to ask me those same two questions every morning before I start my day.”

So, who are you? What are you doing here? The rabbi recognized the significance of these questions and wanted to remember them every morning. Likewise, we are often confronted with questions of our own identities. Contemplating these questions helps us better understand ourselves.

We might very easily regard embarrassing situations as negative moments of our life, something to be forgotten. And indeed, they leave us with a bad taste in our mouth. But if we are able to learn anything from them, they are positive experiences to be treasured. In fact, we learn mostly through reflecting on mistakes. Everything can become a lesson—all our life situations, all our life events are used by God. They can become consciously religious upon reflection.

Today, we see how a journey with Jesus could become an intense experience of spiritual formation.

Just out of the blue, Jesus asks his disciples about how folks are perceiving him. Disregarding the negative and disparaging opinions of his adversaries, they report about the rumors they've heard from people who are both impressed and confused. Some think he is John the Baptist come back to life after king Herod had him beheaded. A quite strange conjecture since John and Jesus are contemporaries. Others think Jesus is the reincarnation of Isaiah. Others see him as a prophet. This thought is understandable since Jesus' message does resemble that of the prophets of old.

But then the question turns personal: "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter replies on behalf of all: "You are the Messiah." The disciples are clear about Jesus' identity: he is his own person and the One sent by God. The irony is evident, though: the disciples get it right but then are ordered not to say anything about it to anyone. How are they supposed to evangelize?

So, he *is* the Messiah. That's the good news. But then comes the catch: "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer ... be killed, and rise after three days." That's when Peter gives Jesus a piece of his mind: "Oh no. Don't give me that. That will never happen!" The disciples might accept that Jesus' version of Messiah does not contemplate a warrior king. But weakness, rejection, death? No, thank you. The landscape was all too often littered with crosses the Romans were way too keen to make use of. Everyday criminals as well as revolutionaries were crucified on them and left there on display as a deterrent. Is that in the disciples' cards? Are they ready to take that risk?

But Jesus is clear, the Rule of God may be established only through personal commitment to the ways of God in simplicity, in humility, and in vulnerability. The vision of God for the world is on collision course with the forces of evil, and a choice for God that is less than radical is opposed to God and, therefore, satanic. Jesus affirms his leadership and orders Peter to get in line behind him. Jesus' message is clear: "You are to follow me, not the other way around!"

But just like Peter and the rest of the disciples, we all have learned the biblical stories of God's mighty power. God is the One who liberated Israel from the Egyptian enslavement, parted the sea, fed manna and quails to the people starving in the desert, gave the Ten Commandments on Sinai, and led the people safely to the Promised Land. It was God who gave David the strength to face and defeat Goliath, and it was God who kept the three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego alive and dancing in a fiery furnace. God's mighty arm also brought the exiles back home.

With this biblical knowledge, which the disciples and us believe to be the true and inspired Word of God, there seem to be a contradiction with Jesus' message that God's Kingdom will be established through his violent death. People suffering under Roman domination were hardly longing for a savior who would suffer. Those who waited for God to punish the wicked and reward the good couldn't fathom the idea that God's chosen one could be put to death. They lamented the oppression and the suffering they were enduring throughout the centuries, and they always left vengeance to God. But they knew that a suffering Messiah isn't how God works! Eventually, they must not have

associated the stories of the Suffering Servant with the messianic ministry.

So, if Jesus was not spared the cross, should we expect a miracle to our prayers? Human logic does not support a positive answer. No wonder many are scandalized and turn their back at Jesus.

Jesus asks that challenging yet decisive question to us as well: “Who do you say that I am?” What do we expect in our interactions with God? On our own, through individual and communal prayer, through reflections on life events, through spiritual and secular readings, through faith conversations, and through personal and social experiences we are enabled and expected to make sense of our life and provide a credible answer to Jesus’ question. Are we willing to stick with Jesus no matter how unpleasant our life gets?

In a way, Jesus is not only asking whether we are clear about his identity, message, and consequences to his lifestyle. He is most subtly asking whether *we* are clear about our own identity in light of our trust of him, whether we are willing to live out his message, and whether we are willing to embrace the cross which will certainly be on our path as it was on his. So, the question becomes: “Who are we? What are we doing here? What kind of disciples do we want to be?”

Suffering and death are part of his message, and he is not asking if we agree with it or not. Any deviation from that path is “thinking like humans do.” Our answer needs to be not an academic exercise on the ways of the Lord, such as the one that might surface from a Bible study, which merely satisfies our curiosity about him; nor simply a cerebral affirmation of

adherence to his message for the ephemeral satisfaction of an ethical and social recognition.

Our answer to Jesus' question must come out of total abandonment into his loving arms, total acceptance to be his at any time and place; it must declare the radical commitment to be always learning, always growing, always surrendering to his will even when doing so means renouncing our ways, our pride, and our expectations. I like a modern rendition of the way Jesus speaks to the disciple by author and translator, Sarah Ruden: instead of "He spoke openly," she has "He was giving this discourse with confident freedom." And then Jesus' punch line: "If someone wants to follow behind me, let him renounce all claim to himself, pick up the stake he'll be hung on, and follow me."

Jesus is firmly saying that there is violence in his future and in the future of anyone who follows closely in his footsteps. Not only that, he also says that they will lose the battle according to the world's standards. They will look like fools following a loser. Are they up to it? Are we?

Much as we resist it, the God we meet in Jesus, the Christ who is our savior, is thoroughly unlike the shiny god of materialism, the shrewd political leader, or the god of strength and militaristic power the world urges us to worship. The God we meet in Jesus shows a different kind of power: he does not squash evil, but takes it in. In Christ, God suffers evil to transform it. Jesus did not escape the cross but revealed evil's ultimate powerlessness by overcoming it with unrelenting love. His way of life conquers suffering and death.

But it gets trickier. Your personal surrender calls you shoulder to shoulder with others who have been called on the same journey to follow Jesus. Yours is not an isolated adventure. You belong to saints and sinners who have also been called, and on their own and at their level of faith and understanding have given their personal answer to Jesus' question. All of us together are the Body of Christ empowered by the Spirit to respond to the will of God to create a more just and peaceful world not without personal sacrifice and suffering.

According to our individual abilities and according to our unconscious blindness and our evident (to all but not to us) stubbornness which resists the call to forgive and be forgiven, we make space to the Spirit to lead us as a community of believers into the ways of Jesus. A healthy Body works together not only accepting but rejoicing and welcoming the diversity of the other members so that the whole Body may grow, advance, proclaim, and make visible the life in the Kingdom of God.

Now, that Body, even though it is the Body of Christ on Earth, is not a perfect Body but it is a *Holy* Body made so by the presence of Jesus' Spirit that entices and cajoles us to a humbler collaboration with one another keeping the focus on Jesus, our eyes on the center, becoming ever more Christo-centric and not me-centered. It does not mean that we like everything we hear or agree with everything that we set our mind to do. But if in prayer we learn to be of the same mind of Christ, then we learn also how to bridle our tongue and fervent spirits and become patient with one another, welcoming one another in the Lord, and forgiving as we are forgiven. To speak the truth in love is important, but that is only a distant second to being true.

From what does Jesus want to free people so that they will be able to pick up a different kind of burden and follow him? Is it pride that holds us back? Is it fear of losing our standing within the community? Is it prejudice? Is the attachment to material comforts and the enjoyment of social status that hinder our closer walk behind Jesus? Then and now, Jesus invites followers on the way of the cross—a path of daily learning, dying, and new life.

The God we serve comes to us as a suffering God. Let's learn from Jesus to love as he loved, to speak as he spoke, and to embrace the cross that gives life as he did. Amen.