

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
Richmond, Virginia
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Mark 8:27-38

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?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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."

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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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."

You've heard the phrase, "We stand on the shoulders of giants." It is hard to know exactly who said it first, but it was said, famously, by the 17th century scientist, Sir Isaac Newton. "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

We build on what has gone before. I am an amateur guitar player. I don't have to build a guitar. Someone else has figured that all out for me. I don't have to figure out how to tune it, again that has been solved. Others have shown me how to make chords and where the notes are. All of that is given to me. If I can do anything with a guitar, (truth be told, it isn't much!) it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants.

This same dynamic is at work with the Christian faith. In today's Gospel, Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" We have the benefit of Peter's answer, "You are the anointed of God, you are the Messiah." We also have the benefit of Jesus' teaching. The Messiah was to have been a conquering hero, someone along the lines of David or Solomon, and restore Israel to independence and greatness.

But Jesus links the Messiah to suffering. And not because he is perverse, but he knew that it was the only way, that it was God's way. All that is wrong with this world...sin, death, pain, suffering, injustice...all of that is gathered up by the suffering Messiah and it dies with him on the cross so that a new reality can be born. And because of this those who try to save their lives through business as usual will lose them. But those who give their lives to the suffering Messiah and for his good news, will save them.

So the gospel tells us who Jesus is and we know that our faith in him comes with joy and assurance, and it also comes with pain and suffering and challenge. We have the benefit of the written gospels which lay this out for us with all honesty.

Not only that, we have the benefit of the wisdom of the church beyond the pages of the New Testament. For instance, we have the Creeds. Developed and affirmed over the course of several centuries they make explicit some things that are only implicit in the New Testament. So when asked, "Who do you say that I am" we can say, "We believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ", and we can go on from there to say, "He is the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light."

We are given this great insight. Now of course, we have to wrestle with it and claim it, if not invent it, for ourselves. We have to, more importantly, live it out for ourselves. But if we choose, we can receive these precious gifts as gospel truth, the way Isaac Newton received the insights of those before him...the way I just open up the guitar case and take it out without having to

start by chopping down a tree and crafting one from the wood. We can choose to stand on the shoulders of giants and focus on what we can see and do from there.

We have been involved at Grace and Holy Trinity Church for a while now and from this great vantage point with looking forward. On the basis of our faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and as members of this particular congregation, we've been asking, "What is God calling us to do?"

Move is not one of them! Lots of congregations have moved but the people of GHTC are committed to this location. It is a great location for mission, even if it is a poor one for parking. The problems of homelessness and the chance to respond are right in front of us. And, the opportunity to touch the lives of college students and welcome their contributions to our congregation is easy to see. We are in a great location to be a mission outpost for the gospel. It is obvious in a lot of ways, what God would have us do.

We have said that our mission in this place is to do three things: build strong disciples, a strong church community and to serve God and the world God has made. We care about one another as individuals. We have embraced the marks of discipleship, one of which is to seek out the comfort and challenge of spiritual friends.

We also value church community. The Sunday morning breakfasts are a symbol of this, but it also carries on through altar guild teams, choirs, mission teams, foyer groups, small group Bible study and on and on. One really wonderful thing that happens at GHTC on Sundays is that we unite people from all over.

Last Sunday at the children's sermon time with the Rev. Michael Cadaret at the 8:45 a.m. service he had over 20 children and they came from 9 different schools. They came from the east side of Richmond, the Fan, the West End and from three counties. GHTC is one place in Richmond where it is not the "same old, same old."

And of course, in true GHTC tradition, we support individuals and build community, not as end in themselves, but so that we can all, day by day, separately and together, serve God and the world God has made. We have community time but we also turn outward. How could we not if we say that we believe Jesus is the Messiah, the suffering servant and Son of God?

We've been talking about all of these things and we been asking the secondary question: "If we

want to stay in this location and feel called to this mission, do our facilities support and empower this work to the maximum degree?" We've had lots of conversations so far and what we have learned is that with some changes our facilities could serve our mission better. We could build community and serve more effectively. Also what came out of the conversations was a clear message "You are thinking too small."

So what began as simply a parish hall project, has expanded, at least on the theoretical level, to embrace creating more effective space for our choir, redoing the kitchen, more effective signage inside and out, more welcoming entrances into the building, the possibility of a columbarium and also refurbishing the chapel.

But let me speak just a bit about the central part of our conversations, the parish hall area and how it relates to our mission. Better entrances can help us be much more welcoming. Right now the back entrance off the parking lot serves as the major entrance. But it is awkward and unclear on where to go. The kitchen serves as a hallway! More room for small groups on Sundays would help us build community. A renovated kitchen can help our breakfasts and our soup kitchen, our campus ministry and our receptions. And figuring out a way to make the parish hall function as a whole, rather than as two or three discrete places...dealing with the dividing wall of hostility that is currently there...so we could more effectively gather all together and not on opposites of a pillar, would be a good thing. This helps us at coffee hour, with receptions after funerals and weddings, for CARITAS¹ as we serve the homeless and so on. There is a clear link between our mission and possible changes.

Plans that reflect our conversations will be presented at 10:00 a.m. on September 30. The Vestry and the Planning Committee want to hear your thoughts. You have been so helpful and creative and changes have already been made on the basis of your insights.

Once we decide what we might like to do, and then price out what it would cost, we can then decide, having those facts in hand, whether we want to go forward, and if so, with what exactly. We are still discerning all of that. And it is scary because if we go forward, it costs money.

¹ Congregations Around Richmond Involved to Assure Shelter

I am showing my age here, but I am reminded of a skit by Flip Wilson. Is there anyone here who knows who that is?

He talks about going to church and how he likes to visit different churches when he is on the road. So, he walks into this one church and the service began, he says, with a 45 minute set by the musicians. Once everybody was good and warmed up, the Rev comes on. And the first thing he does is pass the plate. The plate goes all through the congregation, comes back up but there is nothing in it. So, the Rev. sends it out again. Again, nothing. So the Rev says, "Now brothers and sisters we can't make it like this. I am sure everyone here wants this church to progress. If it is going to progress, first it has to crawl." And all the members said, "Let it crawl Rev!" The Rev continues, "After this church has crawled it has got to stand up and walk." And all the members said, "Make it walk Rev!" "And after this church has walked it has gotta run." "Make it run Rev!" "For this church to run, its gonna take money!" And the members yelled, "Let it crawl Rev! Let it crawl!"² You see that preacher had ceased to preaching and started meddling!

But seriously when we think about our money, it is painful sometimes. We know this as the Church. We know it as individuals. Do we have enough? How much should we give away? What is most important? It raises all kinds of anxieties and fears.

But we know, regardless of our ultimate decisions about how we spend or give our money, wrestling with our stewardship, being uncomfortable, accepting the challenge is part of what it means to say Jesus is the Messiah, part of what it means to lose life in order to gain it, part of what it means to take up the cross.

We do indeed stand on the shoulders of giants...the view from here is pretty astounding., anxieties notwithstanding. How fortunate we are to have life, to have each other and to serve. How fortunate we are to say, Jesus is the Messiah and to live by that light. Amen.

² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-V_ZD6LWYY