

March 4, 2018
Mark 8:27-37



Last August I attended the Men's Health Fair at Jewish Hospital, as I do every year. One of the stations I visit at the Health Fair provides eye exams. After I read the eye chart I was surprised to learn that I have 20/20 vision, which means my eyesight has actually improved in the past few years. After being told I had 20/20 vision I held up my reading glasses and asked, *then why do I need these?*

In reality, our vision is affected by a number of factors. For me, lighting is very important. If I have the benefit of good lighting, I don't need to put on my reading glasses. Sometimes, however, such as when Tanya and I go out to eat at a nice restaurant, I have difficulty reading the menu. In nicer eating establishments the lighting is often dim and the menus reflect what little light there is. Our evening out together is not helped when I take out my phone, turn on the flashlight app, and hold it over the menu so that I can read it. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why we don't often go out to eat at nice restaurants. Just as my physical vision is affected by a number of factors, so is my spiritual vision. I might, on some days, have great insight and understanding, while on other days I can be remarkably dense and lacking in perception.

This morning we begin a new series of messages that will take us through the month of March and into Easter. The title of the series is *What Faith Can See*. In this series I will speak about passages in the gospels that demonstrate how difficult it was for the disciples and others to understand the words and actions of Jesus. At times, such as in the first portion of the passage we study today, the disciples could show a great level of insight and in the very next moment, not so much.

Lest we be too hard on the disciples, and the earliest followers of Jesus, we don't always do that well ourselves when it comes to understanding what Jesus taught, and we have the benefit of 2,000 years of insight and understanding to help us. All of us are

limited in our understanding because we are conditioned by so many factors, such as our historical time period, by the society in which we live, by our beliefs, by our fears, and any number of other factors. Despite the fact that we live in a time that is so much more technologically and scientifically advanced, it is not necessarily any easier for us to understand Jesus now than it was for the disciples. As Jesus was constantly working to open the eyes of his disciples, he seeks to do the same for us as well.

In our Scripture text for this morning we come to the well-known story of Jesus taking his disciples to the area of Caesarea Philippi, where he asked them, *who do people say that I am?* After listening to their responses, Jesus then asked, *but what about you? Who do you say that I am?* Peter gave a response that showed a great deal of understanding, as he said, *you are the Christ.* Peter was correct, but only a few moments later he demonstrated a complete lack of understanding about what it meant that Jesus was the Christ. Jesus, after telling the disciples about his death, was taken aside by Peter, *who began to rebuke him.* Though Peter had a great flash of insight to understand that Jesus was the Messiah, he did not understand what Messiahship meant.

Follow along with me as I read Mark 8:27-37 –

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

So how does our faith help us to see beyond the limits of our vision? In this passage, there are two important ways –

1. *Jesus Wants to Define Who He Is.*

One of the fascinating elements in this story is the abrupt change of course that Jesus makes. Up to this point he is doing things that excited not only the disciples but many other people as well. He performed many miracles of healing – those who were blind, those who were lame, those who were ill, and many more. He fed the multitude with only a few loaves of bread and a few fish. He poked at the religious and political leaders, and enthralled the crowds by doing so. Up to this point Jesus did things that lived up to the hopes of who the messiah would be. How could a person not get excited about the miracles, the great teaching, the challenging of so many in authority? That's great stuff, isn't it? No wonder Jesus had such large numbers of people following him.

And then it comes to this point, and everything changes. After Peter recognized Jesus as the messiah, Jesus begins talking about the cross, and not just his cross, but the cross his followers would have to bear as well. To Peter, it was crazy talk! No wonder Peter was confused. No wonder Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him! Imagine rebuking Jesus! But Peter did. In Peter's mind, the kind of talk that Jesus offered simply wasn't good marketing. How do you draw a crowd with talk of crosses and death?

So what was Peter missing? It was, I believe, this – as long as Jesus was doing the things that Peter liked, he was totally with Jesus. As long as he was performing miracles, as long as he was healing people, as long as he was feeding the multitudes, and as long as he was poking at the authorities, Peter was all in with Jesus. That was the kind of messiah he could get behind. When Jesus began to speak about things that were not in Peter's definition of who the messiah would be, however, Peter not only resisted, he moved to the opposite side! That's why Jesus said *get behind me Satan*. It wasn't just a simple misunderstanding on the part of Peter; he had moved over to the side of the opposition, because he tried to talk Jesus out of his mission. It's easy to criticize Peter, but what about us? Whether anyone admits it or not, we also want to define Jesus, don't we? Don't we also like the Jesus of miracles and healing, but hesitate when it comes to the Jesus who asks us to take up our cross?

Three weeks from today, on Palm Sunday, we are presenting a play about this very idea. Titled *Jesus Was, Jesus Is*, the play examines the way in which the Biblical characters saw Jesus in different ways and also their inability to agree on who he was (and by the way, I get to play the part of Paul in that play, and I need to say two things – first, I'm not an actor, and second, remember that some of the things I say are the words of the author of the play and their interpretation of Paul. You'll know what I mean when you see the play).

It's easy to define Jesus as the messiah who will always keep trouble and difficulty at a distance, but that's not the kind of messiah he is. It's easy to wish Jesus would always be the messiah that feeds that multitudes, that heals the blind and the infirmed, that raises the dead; but that's not always the his way. He'll give us strength and walk with us, but he will not always spare us from illness and difficulty and suffering and loss. We want Jesus to be a messiah who will give us an easy, cushy life, with a constant stream of

abundance and prosperity, but that's not the kind of messiah he is. We certainly don't like the idea of a messiah who not only takes up a cross and we really don't like the idea of a messiah who asks us to take up a cross as well.

Jesus is going to do the defining about who he is, not us.

2. *Jesus Wants to Define People.*

Jesus was very intentional, I believe, about taking his disciples to Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was a center of many religions; it was a buffet of religious beliefs and cultural practices. In Caesarea Philippi one would find many temples dedicated to the worship of the Greek and Roman gods and it also had a temple dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperor. It was the kind of place that was very far outside the comfort zone of the disciples. In that region, people believed differently. They talked differently. They looked different. They dressed different. They acted different.

By taking his disciples to this area Jesus was being very deliberate about exposing them to the wide range of differences in people. Differences are tough, aren't they? We are frightened of differences. We like to be with people who are like us; people who look like us, talk like us, and believe like us. It's often said that 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America, and I guess there is some truth to this. It's not because we don't like one another; we're just more comfortable being with people who are like us. As a congregation we have a little bit of diversity. We're probably more diverse than a lot of churches, but we could use some more. To achieve this, we have to think and act consciously about diversity, because it doesn't happen to us naturally.

Being with those who are similar to us has always been a characteristic about people, even God's people. In the early church, there was actually a large gathering to discuss the differences in people. Acts chapter 15 tells us about the Council at Jerusalem, which I hope you will take some time to read this week. The Council at Jerusalem was a gathering called by the leaders of the church to discuss what to do about all the Gentiles who were coming into the church. They were from cities and towns that did not have Hebrew names. They were people with different kinds of names. They spoke in different languages. They ate different foods. They believed differently. They thought differently. Their cultures were different. All of this made many of those in the church very uneasy, even some of the leaders. Peter, for instance, had difficulty accepting the Gentiles. Acts 10:9-48 tells about the vision Peter has about the animals and his being commanded to kill and eat of the animals. The vision is an analogy to the Gentiles, and Peter's resistance of them, and God telling Peter to accept them. The verses after the vision tell the story of Peter's coming to terms with accepting the Gentiles, but it was not an easy matter for him and it did not happen all at once. Peter and Paul had a conflict over this issue, with Paul even writing in Galatians 2:11 that *when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong*. Paul noted that Peter would sometimes change his attitude depending upon whom he was with. If Peter was

with people who were Jewish, he was less open to the Gentiles; when he was with the Gentiles, he was more open to them (Galatians 2:12-14 – *12 For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. 14 When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?*

The Council of Jerusalem was a very momentous gathering in the life of the early church, because the leaders of the church were considering whether or not they would *require* certain things of the people coming into the church. Would they be required to abstain from certain foods? Would they be required to follow certain religious days? Would they be required to believe certain things? Looking back at this gathering, it is hard to imagine that they would even consider imposing so many things upon people who were new to the church, but again, is it any different today? Just as the early church struggled to adapt to people of different cultures and thus wanted those people to adopt the church’s culture, we sometimes do the same today. If you haven’t noticed, every church has its own culture and often does not recognize that they expect conformity to that culture from people who come into the congregation.

I believe that in taking his disciples to an area that was filled with such a diversity of people Jesus was making a very powerful point, and that was that we must not allow our differences to prevent us from welcoming and loving people. Our differences often keep us apart, but we should never be afraid of those differences and we must not allow those differences to keep us from welcoming and loving people in the name of Jesus. We love people because Jesus did. Jesus loved without limits and without constraints. Jesus had no qualifications attached to his love. There was no list of regulations to which people had to conform.

Reading through the gospels we find that it is on this point – his love and acceptance of all people – that Jesus received the greatest amount of criticism. The religious leaders did not appreciate Jesus’ open embrace of people. He was criticized for associating with “sinners” and had no hesitation in gathering with and loving the outcasts (Luke 15:1-2). He had no qualms about accepting and loving the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2-11), the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-27), and Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector (Luke 19:1-10). He did not shy away from those with leprosy, as would have been accepted at the time (Luke 17:11-14). It is easy for us to feel uneasy about embracing and loving those who are different from us, and those whom society deems as unacceptable, but to walk in the way of Jesus means we must love as he did.

Without realizing it, we often like or affirm people based on whether or not they affirm and agree with us. Psychologists call this *confirmation bias*, and it is very much a part of our current cultural climate. We turn to news outlets that affirm what we already

think and believe. We read books and articles that reflect our point of view. We associate with those who look like us, talk like us, think like us, and believe like us. How often do we consciously and deliberately put ourselves in places and situations where we are with people who are different?

This is what Jesus did when he took his disciples to Caesarea Philippi. He took them somewhere out of their comfort zone. He took them somewhere where people were different. He took them somewhere that would make them uncomfortable. And he did so to make the point that they were not to define people according to their differences, but in the way that Jesus defined them, and that was as people who were valued, accepted, and loved by him.

Years ago, when I was much younger, I had a job that placed me in a setting that I did not like. It was different from much of my life experience, and some of the people that were my coworkers were very different from me. In my first weeks on the job I hoped that I could find another place of employment, but gradually I came to understand that God had placed me there, and by placing me there I had an important lesson to learn. I came to love the people that I worked with, and when I left there to return to seminary, I was sad to leave my coworkers, because I knew it was unlikely that I would ever see any of them again. I have thought of my former coworkers many times over the years, and when I think of them I thank God for placing me in that job, a job that taught me a great deal about people. I needed to learn how to love people who were different from me, and in the thirteen months that I worked there I learned a great deal about how to have that kind of love.

Faith can help us to see beyond the limits of our vision. Faith can help us to see Jesus for who he really is and it can help us to see people in the way that Jesus sees them. This is the kind of vision we need. May we learn to see beyond the limits of our vision!