

The Challenge of Identity

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time year B

Mark 8:27-35

Oh: such a warm and fuzzy gospel!

Actually: although disturbing, it is really amazing.

Jesus is on a journey of self-disclosure.

If He is the God-man, then such self-disclosure is revelation of God.

Jesus opens to the mystery of God.

Jesus and the disciples are headed to Caesarea Philippi,
the land of Caesar, land of human greatness.

Caesarea Philippi serves as a contrasting backdrop
for what Jesus seeks to reveal.

What Jesus seeks to reveal does not resonate
with our notion of human greatness.

Jesus begins by asking his disciples who people say he is.

“What identity is on people’s minds when they think of me?”

“If I were to be a guest on Oprah, how would she frame my person?”

It seems to be a simple and straightforward, yet almost surprising question.

Since when is Jesus concerned with what people think of him?

It is not as though *mis*-perception is going to change his mission.

What Jesus really does is set the stage for revelation to the disciples.

He will *tell* them who he is. *He* will tell them who he is.

On behalf of the disciples—as is often the case, Peter responds.

“You are the Christ.”

Jackpot! Peter got it right.

Only, Jesus warns them not to tell anyone.

Why?

Why not say, **“Great. You got it. Now go tell them that I am not
John the Baptist, Elijah, or just one of the prophets.”**

Does He want to play hide and seek?

Does He want, after all, to fine-tune his public image?

No: He wants to reveal to the disciples who the Christ truly is
—lest *they* fall into misperception.

Who is “the Christ”?

“Christ” means “anointed”.

And the predominant Jewish expectation of the Christ
did not correspond to the reality.

The Christ must suffer, be rejected, and be killed—and rise after three days.
My guess is that the disciples did not hear the last part
—so much did the first part not correspond to their Jewish expectations.

Peter, apparently feeling rather confident and comfortable with Jesus,
takes Jesus aside and begins to *rebuke* him!

Don't you love it?!? Good old Peter: well-intended, but sometimes stupid.
I can envision him:

“Jesus. We can't have you saying this stuff. We'll never get followers.

How does Jesus respond? **“Get behind me Satan!”**

Boy is Jesus peeved. Or *is* He?

Is it an outburst of anger?

It surely seems excessive.

What is Jesus saying..?

Satan is the one who is anti-love.

Jesus always responds strongly when love is at stake.

Jesus has just revealed how He is to pour forth His love:

suffering, rejection, death (and three days later: resurrection!).

Peter is absolutely clueless.

Peter has no sense—as we would—that love can be poured forth in this way.

Jesus responds in very strong terms so to indicate that the Cross

utterly transcends human logic.

But why call Peter **“Satan”**? All Peter needs to think is that he is possessed!

He is not too bright; it will not help him!

Jesus is not suggesting that Peter *is* Satan.

Jesus is saying that, left to our minds alone,

we will not understand who He is.

We can see observe—via historical references—human accomplishments.

But Jesus as the Christ can only be discovered with the help of God, in faith.

And the Christ as the One who lays down His life,

to communicate love in ways the normally do not communicate love,

can *really* only be discovered with the help of God, in faith.

I think we can often be numbed by or “accustomed” the Cross.

We think, “Oh yeah, Jesus died; of course.”

There is no “of course” to the Cross.

There is no growing accustomed to the Cross if we look squarely.

One does not normally die to communicate love.
The God-man, however, can, because He holds death in His hands.
Only Jesus can, and Jesus does.
Jesus died 2000+ years ago, but the love with which he died is eternal.
It still flows.
We believe that it flows onto our altar when we celebrate the Eucharist.
And it is a flood of love that risks sweeping us away.

It seems to me that
 the only way to be real with Jesus,
 the only way to be real with this mystery of the Cross
is surrender.
We cannot put Jesus in a box.
He is too big and there is too much love: the box will burst.
Hence the strong conditions for discipleship: self-denial and loss of life.
(sounds like fun to me!)
Jesus is speaking of *total* surrender.
There really is no such thing as partial surrender.
Why? Because surrender is an act of love,
 and there is no such thing as mini-love.
Now, we may struggle in surrendering,
and may not be emotionally “on board”. But that is fine.
In the end, it is a matter of *wanting* the Lord,
which entails being honest about struggles
Such honesty is already surrender!

In surrendering, we belong to the lord of life.
We “save” our lives, and come alive, and are alive forever.