

Divine Things

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Date: March 4, 2012

13:55

What strikes me about this morning's passage is the upheaval of expectations. We look at a situation or a person and expect a certain outcome, only to have our notions shattered, our expectations challenged. I heard a story about a man caught in a flood. He has to escape to the roof of his house and he's sitting there waiting to be rescued. He starts praying, "Please God, save me. Rescue me from this flood." And then all of a sudden, a neighbor in a canoe floats by and offers to help, but the man turns the neighbor down, saying, "Not to worry, God will save me."

Later, with the water rising more and more each minute, the police come in a boat and offer to help the man. He turns them down too, saying, "I'm perfectly fine up here on my roof, go rescue others. God will save me."

Finally, a helicopter appears and the pilot announces that he needs to airlift the man to safety. The man says, "Oh, no thanks. God will save me."

Unfortunately the man drowns, and appears before God in heaven. The man starts ranting and raving, "I've been a good Christian my whole life and I was praying all during that flood for you to save me. And you let me die—why God? Why would you do that?"

God, in exasperation, says to the man, "Look, I sent your neighbor in a canoe, the police in a boat, and a helicopter crew to airlift you to safety. What more could I have done to rescue you from that flood?"

The man seemed to have expected God to come to him in a specific way, to save him in a different form. He refused to see the hand of God at work in the canoe, the boat, and the helicopter—all vehicles that could have saved his life. And this reminds me of Peter's reaction in today's passage.

A little earlier in Mark Chapter 8, Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus explains that the disciples' long-held Messianic expectations won't come true, that Jesus is the Messiah in an unexpected way. Jesus says, "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."^[1]

What we have to keep in mind is that Peter just said out loud for the first time that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One. This was a potent title in Jewish tradition. The most common understanding was that the Messiah would be an ideal king descended from David, one who would "conquer the nations and judge the world" and his reign would be a time of "peace, prosperity, and justice."^[2] Peter has this image of Jesus as the Messiah in his mind and then he hears a different version of the story. He can't imagine a Messiah who suffers, who gets rejected, who gets killed—this is not what's supposed to happen to the Messiah. This is not what the Messiah is supposed to look like. The Messiah is kingly and glorious, not rejected and despised. The Messiah is the champion, the victor, not the underdog who predictably gets defeated at the end of the story.

When Peter hears Jesus describe this new version of the old image, he takes Jesus to the side and "rebukes him."^[3] This is Jesus' right hand man, and "rebuke" is a strong word. To rebuke is to criticize sharply or reprimand. Peter must have really laid into Jesus.

And Jesus reacts just as sharply. Instead of keeping him off to the side though, out of earshot of the others, he reprimands Peter for the disciples to hear. Jesus tells him that he's in the wrong in the context of the community because he knows that Peter can't be the only one with preconceived notions of what the Messiah should look like and who the Messiah should be.

Jesus tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."^[4] This whole exchange is fascinating and emotional, complicated and sad. Peter's rebuke is probably coming from a good place—he doesn't want Jesus, his teacher and his friend, to suffer and die. Jesus probably has to be a little harsh to get Peter to understand that he's focusing on the wrong things. His preconceived notions are getting in the way of the present reality.

John Westerhoff, a former professor at Duke Divinity School, tells a story of shattered expectations, of preconceived notions almost getting in the way of a holy moment. Westerhoff was invited to lead a conference on baptism in Belfast, Ireland years ago for both Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy. At the same time, there was a gathering held for both Protestant and Catholic children from these communities. The children gathered to get to know one another and hopefully break free of the prejudice and hostility they were sometimes learning at home or just from sheer ignorance of the other due to limited interaction with their neighbors.

Each morning Westerhoff began the day with simple prayers that would be acceptable to everyone gathered. He would also tell a story from the Bible, with the themes of healing and reconciliation present in the text. Westerhoff asked the participants to sit in silence and absorb the scripture after he was done reading. He relates, "The two groups had spent much of the week arguing with each other and talking past each other. I felt like a failure as a teacher."

But one morning, a Roman Catholic monk chose to step outside his comfort zone, to break the status quo of adults sitting in chairs while the children sat on the floor. He decided to sit with the kids. And here's what Westerhoff tells us happens next, "I had chosen to tell the story of the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' cloak and was healed. In the silence that followed, whispers could be heard between a little Protestant girl and the Roman Catholic monk. 'Can I touch you?' she asked. 'Of course, he said.'

'I'm scared.' 'Why?'

'If my father knew I touched you, he might beat me.' 'Perhaps he does not need to know.' Then she reached out a finger and touched him. Looking at her finger she exclaimed, 'Nothing happened!' With tears welling up in his eyes, the monk said, 'Yes, it did. You and I will never see the world the same again.'"^[5]

And this must have been what it was like for Peter to hear from his beloved teacher that everything he thought he knew about him as the Anointed One of God was wrong. Peter would not see the world in the same way again because Jesus wasn't going to be the conquering hero sitting on a throne of victory; Jesus was going to be the suffering servant bearing a cross up a hill.

Jesus advised his disciples to keep their minds on divine things, not human. Good advice for us all. If that little girl would have just kept her mind on human things, she never would have reached her hand out to the monk. If that monk had just kept his mind on human things, he never would have sat down with the children. The Catholic monk and the Protestant girl wouldn't have had the conversation in the first place had they kept their minds on human things. They were able to see the world differently because they were able to look past human limitations of prejudice and preconceived notions; they were able to enter into a new world

together once they were focused on healing and reconciliation, which are certainly divine things.

And so I wonder how we limit ourselves when we have the initial reactions of rebuke and discomfort like Peter, taking Jesus aside to tell him that he didn't like what he was hearing. What if we left ourselves open to mystery, to transcendence, to challenged notions, to changed expectations? What would happen if we sat down together and let go of our fears? What would happen if we kept our minds not on human things, but on divine things? May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Mark 8:31.

[2] David B. Levenson, "Messianic Movements" in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 531.

[3] Mark 8:32.

[4] Mark 8: 33.

[5] John Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life: The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching*, 50-51.