

"The Gap Between Knowing and Doing." Gen. 17:1-7, 15-16; Ps. 22:23-31;
Mark 8:31-38.

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Lent 2, March 8, 2009

Up until now, Peter and the others have taken a risk in their relationship with Jesus. He called them away from the comforts of home, the security of family, steady work and a settled life. Now they were on the road with this itinerant preacher. What had they gotten in return for their investment of time spent with Jesus?

Quite a bit, actually. They had seen demons cast out, lepers cleansed, the sick set free from their ailments, the paralyzed up and walking, the stormy sea stilled, even the dead brought back to life. Thousands are fed, the authorities challenged at every turn. The list goes on.

In the face of this mounting evidence, Jesus turns to the disciples and asks them who he is. Peter is quick to answer with the thoughts on everyone's mind: "You are the Messiah, the Anointed one sent from God."

That's what they thought. That's what the evidence pointed to. This was the investment of a lifetime and a sure-fire, iron-clad "bailout" from all the pains and worries, all the sufferings and hurts, all the oppression and violence that had ruled the day for far too long.

It seemed like the right answer and it was the right answer. It was the answer Mark had already primed us to have in his opening verse to his gospel: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." But knowing the right answer and then acting in a way that shows we know what it means is where it gets tricky.

Right away Jesus begins to teach them the deeper and perhaps darker truth of who he is as Savior and Lord. He is the Son of God who has come down, stooped down really, to our lowliness and become one of us. In the process he invites us to join in that descent. It goes far deeper than we would imagine. Jesus invites us into a descent to suffering along with the rest of the larger human family.

Jesus tells the truth of the real message of deliverance in God. It is a story of suffering, rejection by those who claimed to be closest to God's heart, painful death and ... glorious resurrection.

Most of this just didn't match Peter's or our idea of what a Messiah should do. Mark relates how Peter pulled Jesus aside and basically said, "What do you think you are doing? This isn't the trip we signed on for and it isn't the way it's supposed to be! There are people counting on you, Jesus. We're counting on you! People are getting upset. Quit all this negative stuff. You are the Christ! Act like it!!"

It's strange, but the only one whose rebukes take hold in Scripture are Jesus' rebukes. The rest just don't seem to work.

Peter's private rebuke of Jesus becomes Jesus' public rebuke of Peter and of any who don't make the connection between who he is as Messiah and what he does as Messiah. He calls Peter Satan, the one who is aligned not with the things of God but with the things of humanity and all our false and twisted ideas of what constitutes true power, true wisdom, true love and true discipleship.

God in Christ has come to show us the way back to God's heart. It is a heart of compassion. It is a heart that suffers along with us and leads us through that suffering to the most important thing of all, the one thing that Peter either didn't hear or couldn't hear or simply couldn't

fathom: resurrection and union with God. It is the promise that God in Christ holds out to us and seals in his own blood.

What we have in Jesus Christ is exactly what we need: our God who knows our weakness and bends down that we might be lifted up. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was quoted as saying: "Only a suffering God can help." The God who suffers with us can enlarge our hearts to know that suffering alongside of others is a sacred journey.

But this is not the kind of God Peter was looking for. He was looking for an answer based on what he knew. So are we. But the reality is Peter has more reason to be let off the hook than we do. If Jesus was hard on Peter, he will be hard on us too. We are supposed to know the full story. We are the inheritors of the gospel message in its entirety. The first disciples knew only the possibility of the promise being fulfilled in Jesus. We, however, stand on the other side of Easter.

And yet. And yet we too experience this gap, as it were, between what we know and what we do based on what we know.

And we are not alone in this. Maybe it takes more than just head knowledge to understand. Maybe Mark himself lets us in on a secret to what is required.

Right before this moment of identifying Jesus as Messiah there is a healing story, but a particular kind of healing story. In it Jesus administers a healing touch to a blind man. After the first touch the man sees, but only partially. He says, "I see people but they look like trees walking".

What is needed is a second touch from Jesus so that he can see clearly. One wonders whether this is Mark's way of setting up what is to come.

Peter has the sight to see who Jesus is, but he needs the second touch, as it were, of the experience of the cross and the resurrection to really see what God has been about from the beginning: ushering in a new relationship of grace in which sin is defeated and death is shown the door.

Could it be that we too need that second touch from God to go from simply being able to identify who Jesus is to being able to identify with him and to know that we are called to be doing the things that are part of his kingdom, the tasks of willing and clear-eyed discipleship?

We are called to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. We are called to stand with the powerless and to point to inequities in society and in our world. We are called to be prepared to know that those who stand on the side of justice and peacemaking are often the ones who stand in the way of those who thirst for power and those for whom the status quo is a great money maker.

As we identify who Jesus is and as we look with our "post-Easter" eyes to see the affects of his resurrection on the Christian community and the world, we know what Peter could not know on that day near Caesarea Philippi. We know that it takes the cross to see who Jesus really is.

The cross reveals the nature of God to us and to all, and even to the heathen Roman soldier who looks at Jesus and can say in astonishment and awe, "Truly this was the Son of God."

The cross is that point of eternal contact between our humanity and God's willingness to become human and to suffer alongside us so that we, in turn, might know the blessings of total union with God.

May we pray that whatever gap exists between our knowledge of who Jesus is and our understanding of what it means to be his disciple will be bridged as we continue in this journey of faith and as we take ourselves out of the center and willingly put Christ and his kingdom's goals in its place.

Amen.

Albert Schweitzer ends his Quest for the Historical Jesus with these words:

"He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same words, "Follow thou me!", and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is". (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p 403)