



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

17th Sunday after Pentecost - Year B - September 16, 2018

Sermon Title: "Confrontation and Commissioning"

Gospel Text: Mark 8:27-38

If you had a red pen and wanted to mark the very middle of Mark's Gospel, all you would have to do is draw your line at the end of today's Gospel lesson. Eight chapters in front of the line and eight chapters after it. But that red line would signify something much more important than a midway point in a book. Today's Gospel also brings us to the midway point in the story of Jesus and the disciples. In fact it's even more than a midpoint – it's a *tipping point*.

From here, Jesus will proceed to the Mount of the Transfiguration and then south – steadily, unrelentingly south – to Jerusalem and the crucifixion that awaits him. And so today's Gospel – this theological tipping point – reveals the first falling pebbles in an avalanche of events that will echo throughout eternity and transform all of creation through the means of a cross and an empty tomb.

What happens at this tipping point that makes it so significant? Two things: a confrontation and a commissioning. The *confrontation* begins with the setting of this scene. There's Jesus – one lone man with a ragtag band of disciples – holding himself out as the *Messiah*, the *Christ*, the *anointed one*, in a place that's a shrine both to pagan gods and the Roman Empire. Caesarea Philippi represents the epitome of worldly power and the false gods who rule through a crippling combination of fear, intimidation, and insecurity. It is everything Jesus is not.

The cosmic and eternal nature of this confrontation is lost on the disciples, because, like most of us, they can't see very far beyond their own needs. You see, this confrontation is going to require Jesus to behave in ways that are very uncharacteristic of a *Messiah*, a *Christ*, an *anointed one*. Jesus lays it all out with blunt clarity. He's going to suffer, be rejected, and then killed. That's bad news in and of itself. But for the disciples it's particularly painful. They're going to lose their leader, their teacher, their *caregiver*. It will leave *their* future very much in doubt. After all, if a *messiah* can be killed, so can his followers.

And so all this fear and anxiety boils over in Peter; he starts shouting, causes a scene, and tells Jesus he doesn't know how to do his job. Now the confrontation has become very local and very personal. It brings us to the second characteristic of this tipping point – a *commissioning*.

Jesus has known for some time that he isn't going to be with the disciples much longer. It has never been part of the plan that he would. The disciples are just now figuring out that Jesus won't be their caregiver anymore. Yet his work must go on. And so at this tipping point, Jesus commissions his followers to be the new caregivers. But what does that entail? Well, here

are the conditions: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Through the centuries, these words have troubled Christians. It sounds like hard work. *Indeed it is.* It seems as if it might bring about suffering and surrender. *Indeed it does.* And it seems to require that we let go of all the false gods and insecurities we’re clutching in our hands, so that we are free instead to embrace the way of the cross – the way of service, self-sacrifice, mercy, forgiveness, and love. *And so it does.*

“But wait,” you say, “This isn’t what I signed up for.” Actually, *it is*, at least according to Jesus. The way of the cross is the pathway he calls his followers to walk. He has saved us, loved us, blessed us, and cared for us so that we can love, bless, and care for others, and in doing so point our neighbors to the salvation embodied on that very cross we are clutching.

Care receiving and caregiving is part of a natural cycle we’ve all experienced. When we were babies, caregivers changed our soiled diapers and fed us. As we grew, they helped us with homework, dried our tears, put up with our moods and phases, taught us about responsibility and compassion, and equipped and encouraged us to be caregivers for others. In a very similar manner, Jesus first *cares for us* and then *calls us* to take up our cross so that *we* can begin caring for *others*.

It can be scary to move from being a *care receiver* to a *caregiver*. The only way I can begin to understand all of this is through the lens of being a parent. I’m an adoptive father. My daughter was two weeks old when I first held her, and my son was ten days old. And in both cases, these strangers, formed from the DNA of other people, became *my* flesh and blood as soon as their skin touched mine. Make no mistake – this isn’t because I’m something special. Far from it. It’s a grace from God that somehow the hearts of parents – be they adoptive or biological – are bound in some mystical but very real way to the hearts of those precious, vulnerable little children whom God entrusts to us.

But being a parent is like nothing else I’ve ever experienced. It’s one big, long, surprise. Some of it’s ugly, and some of it’s beautiful. Some of it you can prepare for and anticipate. But most of it is improvisational, seat-of-the-pants, hold-on-for-dear-life stuff. Ever notice that in the midst of being a caregiver, you finally begin to understand the people who cared for *you*? I know now why my parents passed up vacations and new clothes for themselves, so that I could have what I needed for school. I know now why my folks worked until they were bone tired, and then stayed up to the wee hours of the night until they knew I was home and safe. It’s called sacrificial love, and sometimes we aren’t capable of seeing how much of it we have *received* until we are called upon to *give it* ourselves.

And so Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” As you pour yourself out in sacrificial love and service for those around you, you will better understand your Savior, who poured himself out for you. And as your understanding of Jesus grows, so will your love for him.

Do you think you're ready to pick up your cross and love and serve your neighbors? I don't believe any of us are *truly* prepared or equipped for it. *But waiting is not an option.* Can you imagine if everyone waited to have children until they were financially secure and emotionally prepared for such a daunting job? The human race would be extinct within a generation! Let's admit it – it can be terrifying to be a parent. Every mom and dad – including this one preaching to you right now - has made more than their share of mistakes.

The same is true of discipleship. Look no further than Peter himself. Yes, Peter would recover from his argument with Jesus in today's Gospel, but he'd repeatedly screw up again, most notably when, in the shadow of the very cross he was supposed to take up, he would deny Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. But even then Jesus would never cease loving him, and in the days following the resurrection, Jesus would restore Peter and continue Peter's transformation into a lion of the faith.

If Jesus could work such miracles with a headstrong, stubborn person like Peter, don't you think Jesus can do something with us? In the contribution of your time, in the offering of your money, and in the pouring out of your love, Jesus now calls you to be the caregivers. By God's grace, *you can do this!* Take up your cross and follow Jesus. Amen.