

Turning points. One reaches the peak of a mountain on a hike and then turns to head down. Your team scores and it feels like momentum has turned in your favor. You earn a degree or receive a grant, and turn to put it into practice. You come to the end of your working days and turn toward retirement. We know about turning points.

The eighth chapter of Mark’s gospel marks a turning point. Jesus and the disciples will soon conclude their time of teaching and healing in northern Israel and head toward Jerusalem, and we know what awaits Jesus there. The disciples do not. In chapter 8, Jesus will reveal he will suffer, die, and be raised on the third day. This is not well received by his disciples and is likely beyond their comprehension.

As I studied the flow of our reading, I found matters of identity raised in the questions and teachings – first, Jesus’ identity and then his followers’. So, I decided to read our lesson in four sections, prefacing each section with a note about identity.

We begin with two questions about Jesus’ identity. Jesus first asks his disciples what people are saying about who he is. One writer suggested the analogy of being in the midst of a presidential campaign and checking with one’s staff on crowd reaction – but Jesus is not asking about whether people regard him as free-wheeling or stiff, or if they perceive him as honest or approachable. Jesus is wondering if folks really know who he is. Let’s begin our reading in Mark 8:27-34:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’²⁸ And the disciples answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’

In Jesus’ time, there was a belief in a kind of spiritual reincarnation, so it was not unusual for people to see in Jesus, the prophetic heroes of faith, including John the Baptist who was only recently martyred. We know the return of Elijah is still part of some Jewish festivals as a place for him is set at the Seder table. Jesus does not respond to this list of names, but asks a second identity question.

²⁹Jesus asked the disciples, ‘But who do you say that I am?’

In other words, “You told me what others are saying; now, what about you?” Even if several may have replied to this second question, gospel accounts offer only one disciple’s response, which has become known as Peter’s confession.

‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’³⁰ And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

In Matthew’s gospel, Peter’s declaration is followed by Jesus’ praise, and Peter being named the Rock on which the church would be built, thought to be the origin of Peter being considered the first pope. By contrast, in Mark and Luke we have Jesus’ curious demand for silence following the Messiah declaration. I like the simple explanation that while Jesus knows himself to be the Messiah, he also knows his idea of Messiah is much different than that of even his closest disciples, so silence is better until they understand. Helping them understand Messiah is what Jesus seeks to do next.

Then Jesus began to teach them that 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

Jesus had redefined Messiah, and they did not like it, if they even understood it. Peter says no more after the traded rebukes, but I wonder if he and the other disciples are thinking, “Jesus, we don’t need a dead Messiah, we need a live liberator.” They had not left their families and given up their fishing businesses or lucrative tax collection work to follow a soon to be dead Messiah.

At this point, we recall Mark wrote his gospel in the second half of the first century, when Rome had wreaked devastation on Jerusalem, including massacres of Jews and the destruction of the temple, the central place of Jewish identity. While a liberating Messiah did not necessarily mean a revolt with weapons drawn, one senses in Peter’s reaction there was more desired than a liberation of soul or spirit. It was hoped there would somehow emerge a genuine overthrow of Rome’s oppression.

Jesus asked two questions: “Who do people say I am?”, then “Who do you say I am?” Then he told his disciples, “This is who I am.” Jesus then called the crowd to join his disciples to tell them, “And this is who you are to be.” As we hear it, we may have the same reaction as one writer who suggested, “After [hearing] these verses, it is a marvel that anyone at all is left being a follower of Christ.” [Feasting on Word, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 68]

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

A spiritual gas station. That is how one group of church officers described this church – a spiritual gas station where one comes to fuel the soul. In late July, I had invited the officers to consider what we were as a church. I offered as an example how President Obama had described the African-American church in his eulogy in Charleston, South Carolina. He had said, “Over the course of centuries, black churches served as:

- hush harbors** where slaves could worship in safety;
- praise houses** where their free descendants could gather and shout hallelujah;
- rest stops** for the weary along the Underground Railroad;
- bunkers** for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement;
- community centers** where we organize for jobs and justice;

places of scholarship and network;

places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm's way, and told that they are beautiful and smart – and taught that they matter.”

Contained in each descriptive word or phrase there is both a sense of place and a sense of purpose. Each could be a mission statement, though what distinguishes a church's statements from those of a business or college, a non-profit or government agency, is the connection made to the one we name Messiah, whose followers we seek to be.

In that joint meeting, other ideas for describing this church were: safe zone, meeting house, place of soul sustenance, and big tent, under which people of diverse opinions and theologies can gather. I will add that the group offering the idea of the Spiritual Gas Station also offered a future oriented alternative of a Spiritual Charging Station – I'm thinking there was a Tesla owner in that group.

This is a difficult Scripture, with images of denying self, taking up the cross, risking one's life. In our religious culture, we prefer to speak in terms of life-giving rather than death-risking. We are rightfully cautious about the phrase “deny self.” for we have seen it used to subordinate others by race and gender, ability and orientation. If we are going to use it as a community, I would suggest we witness best when those of us who are recipients of cultural power and privilege are the first to deny ourselves those powers and privileges before issuing a call of self-denial to others. Finally, the paradox of gaining one's life by losing it sounds good, but if we say we understand what that means, it is likely the next person has a different understanding.

That said, I believe this Scripture, with the disciples saying who Jesus is, then Jesus saying who he is, and then Jesus saying who his followers are to be, is at the heart of our being his disciples individually, and together as Christ's church.

As one looks back at the nature of the American church over the past century, there was a strong emphasis on social relationships in the early twentieth century. A part of this occurred because of the Depression, when the church became a social gathering place when other venues of entertainment or eating were not affordable. I served a church built during the Depression, which had a bowling alley, and it is not the only church to do so as part of being a social outlet. This congregation was not the only one to offer a singles ministry, which in many cases turned into couples groups. My parents' closest friends were always other church members.

Yet, because the church is no longer the social hub of most people's lives, and formal church membership is no longer the only measure of one's faith commitment, I think the church has the challenge and opportunity to define its call and purpose as perhaps it did not have to do so in the past.

Certainly, these days it is still critical for people to be welcomed, and sense the congregation to be a place of relational connection. Yet, today, there is often more diversity of faith, culture, theology and belief within a congregation. It makes for a more vibrant church, but also a challenge to understand not everyone is like me, or believes the way I do. From that joint meeting, one person sent notes of her group's discussion, and at the bottom affixed something I allegedly said. Even if I had not, I would be glad to claim it because I think a church should be a place where, “All are welcome, but all are not welcome to impose their beliefs on others.”

To me, this echoes what James is seeking to encourage within the early church, and particularly to teachers and preachers. James is adamant about the potential of words to either build up or tear down relationships, communities, churches and nations. The comparison of a tongue to a horse's bridle and ship's rudder were common among Greek moralists, for they were easy for all to understand. In the same way a bridle directs a horse, and a rudder a boat, so the tongue directs human speech. In what is sometimes referred to as the Jewish doctrine of two impulses, one has a choice: to utter words of love and praise, or to speak words of hatred and curse.

The challenge to our speech often comes at times of fear, insecurity, or anger, for these emotions often provoke us to panicked, mean, hurtful responses. This is when exercising learned wisdom in our speech becomes critical.

James' writing on speech is based on two simple truths. The first is: controlling speech is difficult; the second is: controlling speech is necessary. No matter what one's theology, there is a particular challenge to control speech when one is so passionately sure one's belief is absolute, the only biblical truth, to the point of believing you are speaking Jesus' fundamental wisdom and truth.

Again, I believe discerning a church's purpose and call is more challenging these days than in the past. Not only are churches rarely the social hub for people's lives, but we are also not the only game in town offering spiritual fuel. As much as I like the sound of this church being a spiritual charging station, we know spiritual energy is being offered in other venues than church, synagogue, mosque or temple. Yoga classes and Crossfit workouts may actually make a more direct link between spirit and body than the church does. Everything from symphony concerts to ballgames can provide outlets from which we feel recharged. TED talks or nature walks might fit the bill for our spiritual need at the moment, and have such an effect that a friend might remark on how we seem to be reenergized, and ask us about it.

Now the temptation of the church may be to compete, to add a little glitz or glamour, to be more entertaining, to keep up with current trends of energy boosting. I believe that is where Jesus' turning point words to his disciples back then, still echo true for us today, and perhaps even more for churches at times of transition as is this congregation.

There is a phrase I believe is appropriate to our text, though perhaps it is now passé. "To die for..." is an expression that can be used to describe an article of clothing one desires – those shoes are "to die for" – or to speak of a car or house one covets, or to simply delight in a food one has tasted – her chili recipe, or his strawberry-rhubarb pie is "to die for." Of course, while this "to die for" expression is not meant to be literal, Jesus is serious about his own death and the risks those who would be his followers are to take.

He defines a follower as one willing to deny self, take up the cross, and save one's life by being willing to lose it. This stands in stark contrast to the woes of the modern church that is worried it is losing members and losing contributions. People readily sense when a church's focus is on its own survival and not bearing the cross of Christ. And to be clear I am not using that term to imply any theological position or biblical belief is superior or dominant, only bearing the cross is our call.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. offered an understanding of what it means to bear the cross almost fifty years ago. He had prayerfully discerned God calling him to speak out against the war in Vietnam in 1967. It was immediately condemned by such as the New York Times, the White House, and many supporters who thought he should stick to speaking of civil rights only. He knew the cost of his words, and shared them with the leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when he told them,

“The ultimate measure of a person is not where she or he stands in moments of convenience, but in moments of challenge, moments of great crisis and controversy.” ... [repeat] He continued,

“When I took up the cross I recognized its meaning. It is not something that you merely put your hands on. It is not something that you wear. The cross is something that you bear and ultimately that you die on.

“The cross may mean the death of your popularity. It may mean the death of your bridge to the White House. It may mean the death of a foundation grant. It may cut your budget down a little, but take up your cross and just bear it.” [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "To Charter Our Course for the Future," address to SCLC staff, May 22, 1967]

“The cross may mean the death of your popularity....It may cut your budget down a little, but take up your cross and just bear it.” I think Dr. King is speaking the words of a “to die for” faith. It is the challenge each of us faces as individuals: to ask, what are we willing to lose of ourselves when we take up the cross? It is a bit harder to define for a church community, particularly one that invites and welcomes diverse peoples and beliefs. Yet, perhaps that is where the spiritual charging station fits. We can be a church that offers a variety of fuels, energizing disciples to deny self, strengthening them to take up their cross, and supporting them in prayer as they gain their lives by their willingness to lose them.

Again, I am not sure exactly what that means, but I believe if refueling people to bear the cross is happening within a church, visitors will sense there is a “to die for” faith living beneath what they see and hear. And it will be different than other fueling stations, for they will feel the pulse of a church willing to put its very life on the line, and I believe many of them will say, “I also want to be a part of that.”