

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Last week in the sermon I avoided the details about the geography and cultural differences, divisions, and conflicts within the Gospel lesson and focused more on the comment Jesus makes to the poor Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin who was seeking healing for her daughter. I attempted to show how Christ's humanity and divinity in one hypostasis, or individual personhood reveals our deeply personal connection to God and despite the rudeness of humanity in each of us and in Christ as well, we learned that the Gospel works. In other words, despite the rude comment of Jesus to the woman, her daughter is healed, and despite the rudeness of humanity, the Gospel works...we too are healed.

But now this week I want to speak more about the geography and cultural differences, divisions, and conflicts because in them we see once again, just as we saw last week, the Gospel goes where we would probably not prefer the Gospel to go and reaches out to people, we would probably assume that it would not reach out to. But when looking past the human boundaries of our knowledge or our understanding that we use to restrict the Gospel, we begin to see that the Gospel of grace and new life is not confined to our human knowledge and understanding. And we can see this in what St. Paul first wrote to the church in Corinth, a church that is set in a very similar setting that takes place in our Gospel today. Furthermore, this letter from Paul can pertain to the church today in our cultural setting as well...St Paul writes:

<sup>25</sup> For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. <sup>26</sup> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption... (1 Corinthians 1:25-30).

When we look at the state of our culture in light of the Gospel along with what Paul is saying, may we learn that God is NOT what we conclude God to be. God is much more than we can begin to fully comprehend and can be found in the very last place we figure God to be.

Mark tells us today in the Gospel that Jesus and the disciples go to the village of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi, is located in a lush area near the foot of Mount Hermon. Caesarea Philippi is a place that is dominated by immoral activities and pagan worship. It is that outlying place that stands a mere twenty-five miles from the religious communities of Galilee. The People of Caesarea Philippi were pagan worshippers of shrines and different gods and when asked, they could tell you the location of the very Gates of Hell. I guess one could say that Caesarea Philippi could be a characterization of our "God-forsaken" culture today with all our pagan worship of self and the things we hold up and idolize from within our culture. But in the midst of this place stands Jesus, the very Son of God, standing with his disciples asking, "Who do people say that I AM?" Now Jesus asks this question of his disciples, but how might we suppose the folks of Caesarea Philippi would answer that?

Given what we know about the culture of Caesarea Philippi along with the culture we experience today, we just might assume that the locals wouldn't have a clue to who Jesus is. Contrary to this assumption, I think it's clear throughout the Gospels that the righteous Pharisees and Scribes along with the "dregs of society," the sick and poor, the "outsiders," or the "out-casts" Jesus encounters, along with the devil himself...all know who Jesus is. But those closest to him haven't a clue.

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What does this mean that Jesus is the Messiah when we hear this today? Is the Messiah the very presence of God's Divine Power? What do we imagine these divine things to be that Peter's mind is to be set on? Does a Messiah simply mean that God will save me and condemn any that I conclude by my knowledge and understanding to be deserving of God's judgment?

Is the church the divine thing we are to set our minds on? Does it mean that God likes our church or the church as we understand the church to be? Where would we locate the perfect church for all the righteous people, where is the most holy of places?

If we claim Jesus to be the Messiah, does that mean I am safe in here, in the church, and those out there will face God's divine wrath? Listen again to what Jesus says today as he stands in the village of Caesarea Philippi:

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He called the crowd with his disciples...meaning, Jesus called the people of that god-forsaken place along with the disciples and said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." In other words, Jesus is NOT defined by the culture that surrounds him, nor is he defined by the people he calls and invites. Our Messiah, God's divine power is seen and defined upon the most divine thing we have before us each week, and that is the cross and NOT my understanding or the place he stands in.

Who is Jesus...Jesus is sacrifice, Jesus is grace, and Jesus is new life, not just for me, but for those sinners out there and we sinners in here. Who is Jesus? Jesus is you; Jesus is me, Jesus is that Democrat, Jesus is that Republican, Jesus is that person who lives in an alternative lifestyle, Jesus is that person sleeping and hungry on the street, and on and on...but most of all Jesus is you, me, and them.

We can all complain about the world, the people in it, and what's wrong with the world. But from the cross we learn that what is wrong out there is NOT them, it's ME. The ancient philosopher Plato taught in his writing entitled, *The Republic* that the struggle over the souls of the young potential philosophers is fundamentally central to the life of any city. The condition of our souls directly reflects on the quality of our public lives. Reform of society begins in reform of soul. Even the best constituted societies will wither if souls are disordered.<sup>1</sup>

From the very beginning, it was God who came looking for us because we could not and cannot recognize nor fully understand what God's promise of grace and life is...even while living in it and benefitting from it. From the very beginning, it is God who gives us the very faith that enables us to dimly recognize the grace and life given NOT just to us...but to all through the life and death of Jesus Christ, not because we deserve it, but because God gives it.

As we face each new day, we close our morning prayer office of Matins with this prayer:

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>2</sup>

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are as Bonhoeffer reminded us when writing about this call to discipleship:

Christians become bearers of sin and guilt for other people.<sup>3</sup>

Just as Jesus Christ bore our sin, we as a church, no matter the setting, no matter the people, as a church we are the body of Jesus Christ given for the world out there...NOT just in here. We are God's divine Incarnate Word that is broken and given to the world. This is the cross we bear...this is the cross we take up when we follow Jesus Christ. When following as a disciple, we do not know where the journey will lead but we know that through Jesus Christ our souls are reformed...and maybe, just maybe, our culture can be reformed through the grace and love we share with it. But like Jesus, on our faith journey we will journey through a God-forsaken culture and we will be handed over to wicked people, rejected, and even suffer. Our call to discipleship may not be what we think it ought to be...we will not be sent among the roses, nor will we be saved from hardships, wickedness, or ridicule...and God may not behave the way we expect God to do so in of our call to discipleship, but through our faith we know that the old self that follows Jesus to the cross will die and the new self will be raised to new life just as Jesus was...

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:5)

From that cross we know too that God reaches out to us, stooping all the way down, to love what is wrong in the world...me, you, us...and all those out there.

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Last week in the sermon I avoided the details about the geography and cultural differences, divisions, and conflicts within the Gospel lesson and focused more on the comment Jesus makes to the poor Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin who was seeking healing for her daughter. I attempted to show how Christ's humanity and divinity in one hypostasis, or individual personhood reveals our deeply personal connection to God and despite the rudeness of humanity in each of us and in Christ as well, we learned that the Gospel works. In other words, despite the rude comment of Jesus to the woman, her daughter is healed, and despite the rudeness of humanity, the Gospel works...we too are healed.

But now this week I want to speak more about the geography and cultural differences, divisions, and conflicts because in them we see once again, just as we saw last week, the Gospel goes where we would probably not prefer the Gospel to go and reaches out to people, we would probably assume that it would not reach out to. But when looking past the human boundaries of our knowledge or our understanding that we use to restrict the Gospel, we begin to see that the Gospel of grace and new life is not confined to our human knowledge and understanding. And we can see this in what St. Paul first wrote to the church in Corinth, a church that is set in a very similar setting that takes place in our Gospel today. Furthermore, this letter from Paul can pertain to the church today in our cultural setting as well...St Paul writes:

<sup>25</sup> For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. <sup>26</sup> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption... (1 Corinthians 1:25-30).

When we look at the state of our culture in light of the Gospel along with what Paul is saying, may we learn that God is NOT what we conclude God to be. God is much more than we can begin to fully comprehend and can be found in the very last place we figure God to be.

Mark tells us today in the Gospel that Jesus and the disciples go to the village of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi, is located in a lush area near the foot of Mount Hermon. Caesarea Philippi is a place that is dominated by immoral activities and pagan worship. It is that outlying place that stands a mere twenty-five miles from the religious communities of Galilee. The People of Caesarea Philippi were pagan worshippers of shrines and different gods and when asked, they could tell you the location of the very Gates of Hell. I guess one could say that Caesarea Philippi could be a characterization of our "God-forsaken" culture today with all our pagan worship of self and the things we hold up and idolize from within our culture. But in the midst of this place stands Jesus, the very Son of God, standing with his disciples asking, "Who do people say that I AM?" Now Jesus asks this question of his disciples, but how might we suppose the folks of Caesarea Philippi would answer that?

Given what we know about the culture of Caesarea Philippi along with the culture we experience today, we just might assume that the locals wouldn't have a clue to who Jesus is. Contrary to this assumption, I think it's clear throughout the Gospels that the righteous Pharisees and Scribes along with the "dregs of society," the sick and poor, the "outsiders," or the "out-casts" Jesus encounters, along with the devil himself...all know who Jesus is. But those closest to him haven't a clue.

Before I was called to St. Paul Lutheran Church, I served about twelve years or so on the Candidacy Committee reviewing and discerning candidates for ordained ministry. The committee would meet and interview each candidate three times throughout their seminary education...once before entrance, once before they went out on internship, and finally just before ordination. It was always in the final interview that one colleague would ask the candidate about to be ordained, "Who is Jesus?" It wasn't a trick question, it did not have any underlying intent, we just wanted to know who Jesus was for this candidate. But the way it was answered at times, by certain candidates, you would think we just asked about the most difficult theological question we could ask of a candidate for ordained ministry. Who is Jesus? NOT, who do others say Jesus is, who is Jesus to you? And yes, we heard many times in the different interviews the answer Peter gives to Jesus, he is our Messiah, but what does that mean? It seemed like Peter and some of the candidates being interviewed, knew all the correct words, but still didn't know who Jesus was.

What does this mean that Jesus is the Messiah when we hear this today? Is the Messiah the very presence of God's Divine Power? What do we imagine these divine things to be that Peter's mind is to be set on? Does a Messiah simply mean that God will save me and condemn any that I conclude by my knowledge and understanding to be deserving of God's judgment?

Is the church the divine thing we are to set our minds on? Does it mean that God likes our church or the church as we understand the church to be? Where would we locate the perfect church for all the righteous people, where is the most holy of places?

If we claim Jesus to be the Messiah, does that mean I am safe in here, in the church, and those out there will face God's divine wrath? Listen again to what Jesus says today as he stands in the village of Caesarea Philippi:

<sup>34</sup> He 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. (Mark 8:34)

He called the crowd with his disciples...meaning, Jesus called the people of that god-forsaken place along with the disciples and said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." In other words, Jesus is NOT defined by the culture that surrounds him, nor is he defined by the people he calls and invites. Our Messiah, God's divine power is seen and defined upon the most divine thing we have before us each week, and that is the cross and NOT my understanding or the place he stands in.

Who is Jesus...Jesus is sacrifice, Jesus is grace, and Jesus is new life, not just for me, but for those sinners out there and we sinners in here. Who is Jesus? Jesus is you; Jesus is me, Jesus is that Democrat, Jesus is that Republican, Jesus is that person who lives in an alternative lifestyle, Jesus is that person sleeping and hungry on the street, and on and on...but most of all Jesus is you, me, and them.

We can all complain about the world, the people in it, and what's wrong with the world. But from the cross we learn that what is wrong out there is NOT them, it's ME. The ancient philosopher Plato taught in his writing entitled, *The Republic* that the struggle over the souls of the young potential philosophers is fundamentally central to the life of any city. The condition of our souls directly reflects on the quality of our public lives. Reform of society begins in reform of soul. Even the best constituted societies will wither if souls are disordered.<sup>1</sup>

From the very beginning, it was God who came looking for us because we could not and cannot recognize nor fully understand what God's promise of grace and life is...even while living in it and benefitting from it. From the very beginning, it is God who gives us the very faith that enables us to dimly recognize the grace and life given NOT just to us...but to all through the life and death of Jesus Christ, not because we deserve it, but because God gives it.

As we face each new day, we close our morning prayer office of Matins with this prayer:

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>2</sup>

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are as Bonhoeffer reminded us when writing about this call to discipleship:

Christians become bearers of sin and guilt for other people.<sup>3</sup>

Just as Jesus Christ bore our sin, we as a church, no matter the setting, no matter the people, as a church we are the body of Jesus Christ given for the world out there...NOT just in here. We are God's divine Incarnate Word that is broken and given to the world. This is the cross we bear...this is the cross we take up when we follow Jesus Christ. When following as a disciple, we do not know where the journey will lead but we know that through Jesus Christ our souls are reformed...and maybe, just maybe, our culture can be reformed through the grace and love we share with it. But like Jesus, on our faith journey we will journey through a God-forsaken culture and we will be handed over to wicked people, rejected, and even suffer. Our call to discipleship may not be what we think it ought to be...we will not be sent among the roses, nor will we be saved from hardships, wickedness, or ridicule...and God may not behave the way we expect God to do so in of our call to discipleship, but through our faith we know that the old self that follows Jesus to the cross will die and the new self will be raised to new life just as Jesus was...

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:5)

From that cross we know too that God reaches out to us, stooping all the way down, to love what is wrong in the world...me, you, us...and all those out there.

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Simon & Schuster, 1987, pp. 25-43.

<sup>2</sup> Lutheran Book of Worship. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1978. From the office of Morning Prayer *Matins*. Page 137.

<sup>3</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Discipleship*. Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Martin Kuske† and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis, Fortress Press paperback edition: 2003. Page 88.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the one who rescued us all from death, rescued our eyes from tears, and our feet from stumbling. May we all walk as his presence in the land of the living until we are called into His glorious kingdom.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*