

Be yourself?

Mark 8:31-38

March 4, 2012

What will we tell them?

What will we tell our children and our grandchildren? What will we tell the generations of young men and young women that come after us?

Will we tell them: "You can be anything you want to be?" "Go for it?" "Choose your own path?" "Follow your own dream?"

Will we tell them: "Just be yourself?" "Just be true to your own self?"

That is what we tell them, isn't it? Why? Why do we tell them: "Just be yourself?" "Follow your own dream?"

Because we love them! Because we want them to live good and full and fulfilling lives. Because we want them to shine, to prosper, to live up to their full potential. Because we want them to be able to fulfill their dreams, not to have to sell themselves short or settle for anything less. Because we want them to be happy.

Is that what they told you? Is that what your parents, your teachers, your mentors told you? Did it work? Are you happy?

Maybe you're not happy. Maybe life has been hard on you. Maybe there have been too many disappointments, too many losses, too many hurts. Maybe you have had to settle for far less than you dreamed.

But if you are happy, are you happy because you have fulfilled all your dreams? Because you did get all you wanted? Because you reached your full potential? Because you did choose your own path? Because you have been true to yourself?

Or isn't it true that as we grow up, as experience gives us some measure of wisdom, we recognize our happiness -- indeed our joy! -- come not from getting what we want, but from wanting what we have?

We learn to adjust our dreams or rather to understand that reality is better than any dream. We find fulfillment not in being ourselves, but in being with and being for, in doing with and in doing for. Our joy comes not in ourselves, but in our relationships, not in living for the sake of ourselves, but in living for the sake of someone else.

And we learn, from experience, that the deepest joys come when we are hardly aware of ourselves at all, when we are intimately connected to something much bigger than ourselves, when we are intimately connected to God. That's why we are here, isn't it? To find and nurture that sense of connection to something, to someone, so much bigger than ourselves? To find meaning and joy and life in something outside us?

What did Jesus tell us? "Be yourself?" Hardly! Jesus said: "If any of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself -- deny yourself -- and carry your cross." "If you want to save your own life, you will lose it."

This scripture is the turning point in the gospel of Mark, marking the transition between that two halves of the gospel. The first half focuses on Jesus' identity: Who is he? It ends with Jesus question to his disciples: "Who do you say I am?" It ends with Peter's answer: "You are the Messiah!"

You are the Messiah! What a thing to say! How did Peter -- how did any of them -- reach such a conclusion? Did Jesus tell them? Did he tell them he was the Messiah? No, he never said any such thing.

They reached that conclusion by watching him, not so much by what Jesus said, but by what Jesus did. He cast out evil spirits. He healed people of their diseases -- of paralysis and deafness and blindness. He calmed a storm and fed a crowd and put breath back into a little girl given up for dead.

The Kingdom of God is near! They saw it with their own eyes! Things were happening, good and wonderful things were happening! Broken people were being made whole again. A hopeless world was being given hope again. You are the Messiah!

Jesus heard Peter say it, and he immediately said two things: "Don't tell anybody" and "I'm going to be killed."

I've spent a lot of time in my career studying this text -- thinking about it, struggling with its implications, teaching it and preaching it -- because Jesus' words are so compelling, because they are so difficult to understand or rather so difficult to do, because they are so central to the meaning of the gospel. But this time, this week, I heard Jesus' words in a different way, from a different perspective, from the perspective of Jesus' himself. I heard him speaking not only to the crowd, not only to us, but also to himself!

Peter has avowed: "You are the Messiah!" What must it mean to hear that? What must it mean to believe that? To accept that mission? To accept that responsibility? What must it mean to look into the faces of all those people clamoring after him, dazzled by his authority, desperate for his help, pinning all their hopes ... on him?

And if he is the Messiah, what does it mean to be the Messiah? That's the question answered by the second half of Mark's gospel: What does it mean to be the Messiah? And what does it mean to be followers of the Messiah?

Jesus knows what it means. He knows what it means to be God's Messiah, the one sent by God for God's own purpose. And that's why he immediately responds to Peter's confession, to remind them what it means and himself.

You see, Jesus' forty days in the wilderness were not the last time Jesus was tempted by Satan! How easy would it be to be the Messiah everybody expected. How easy it would be to claim the rights, the glory, the honor that were rightfully his. How it easy it would be to just be himself!

But Jesus knows the way the Messiah must take. He knows that if he tries to save his own life, he will lose it, and indeed lose everything. That's why he recognizes Peter's objection to all the talk about suffering and death for what it is -- a temptation from Satan.

If any of you want to come with me (and I know where it is that I must go!) ... you must forget yourself (I must forget myself!) ... you must carry your cross (I must carry my cross!) ... and follow me (and I know where it is that I must go!).

This is what it means to be the Messiah and this is what it means to follow the Messiah. This is God's way. This is the way of salvation. This is the way to life!

This is the great paradox: in running after life, we never reach it. In fact, we lose it. But in giving it up, in giving it away, we gain it. Because life isn't mine, to have or to get, to earn or to achieve. Life is a gift, God's gift, a gift to be treasured and a gift to be used, a gift to be used to serve God, a gift to be used to serve God's people, a gift to be used to honor God, a gift to be used to bless God's people.

This is what life is -- not grasping, but letting go. Not lording, but serving. Not hoarding, but sharing. Not taking, but giving. Not being, but being with. Not winning for honor's sake, but losing for love's sake.

Not following my dreams, but living God's reality. Not being myself, but forgetting myself, for the sake of what is far bigger than me, for the sake of the One I follow, for the sake of life itself which is only mine when it is his.

This is what it means to be a follower of the Messiah. This is what it means to be a human being.

So what will we tell them? What will we tell our children and our grandchildren? What will we tell the generations of young men and young women that come after us?

Will we tell them: "Go for it?" "Choose your own path?" "Follow your own dream?" "Be yourself?" But if we do, won't we be doing them a grave disservice? Won't we be setting them down a path that will lead only to emptiness and the loss of anything and everything that matters?

Shouldn't we tell them what Jesus tells us? Forget yourself! Deny yourself! Renounce your own dreams! Give yourself away! Give yourself away to something far bigger than yourself. Live not for your own sake or for the sake of your own dreams, but live for the sake of the God who made you and the Messiah who claims you. Live for the sake of those to whom God has given you as a gift. Be God's gift to them. Be God's gift to the world.

Don't follow your dreams. Follow him! Follow Jesus! Go where he goes! Do what he does! Follow him all the way ... to life!

Because that's what we want for them. That's why we'll tell them. Because we want life for them, true life. Because we want joy for them, true joy. And they will find neither by being true just to themselves. They will find neither by following their own hearts.

If you want to save your own life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for Jesus' sake and for the sake of the gospel, you will save it.