

ONE OF THESE THINGS IS NOT LIKE THE OTHER

MARK 8:31-38

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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On this Second Sunday of Lent we have heard the story of a confrontation between Jesus and Peter. A confrontation and a reorientation.

But to get the whole story, we actually need to begin just a few verses earlier, in Mark 8:27-29:

27 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 they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” **29** He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”

You are the Messiah! Peter offers this first, powerful declaration of Jesus’ identity and mission.

But what did that word *Messiah* mean for Peter?

It didn’t mean “divine being” or “second person of the Trinity” or even “Son of God.” Jesus would be revealed as these things later on, but at this point in the story, the word “Messiah” was a *political* title.

For Jewish readers and listeners, there were at least three important boxes to check off in the “to-do list” for Messiahs:

1. Rebuild/cleanse the temple
2. Defeat the enemy that was threatening God’s people
3. Bring God’s justice to bear—in Israel and throughout the world

This is what people expected from their Messiahs. This is almost certainly what Peter had in mind when he makes his breathless declaration that Jesus is the Messiah.

You can almost sense his enthusiasm. *Finally*, things are going to turn around for them and their people. The Messiah is going to put people in their place and make things right!

But then, in this morning's text, we see that this is not how things are going to unfold.

Not at all.

Jesus starts talking about suffering... and dying... and rejection.

He starts talking about how the most religious and respected people in the Jewish world—the theologians and priests and the elders, the ones that ordinary Jewish people probably looked to for wisdom and instruction, the ones who could presumably be counted on to welcome and embrace people like Israel's Messiah—that *these ones* would be the very ones who would be leading the charge *against* Jesus.

For Peter, this is all wrong. Clearly, Jesus has lost the plot.

And things had been looking *so* promising...

Healings, yes.

Blind people receiving sight, paralytics walking, yes.

The casting out of evil spirits, yes.

Walking on water, yes.

Bringing a little girl back to life, yes.

Teaching about the kingdom of God, yes.

Calming storms, yes.

Miraculous feeding of four thousand people, yes.

All of these things that Jesus had done, as well as others that Mark has described in the previous seven chapters, yes, yes, *yes*.

But, suffering? Dying?

No.

No, no, *no!*

That simply isn't what Messiahs do.

Peter rebukes Jesus. *No, no, Jesus, you've got it all wrong! You're supposed to start a revolution and gather an army and march upon the Romans in Jerusalem...*

And what does Jesus say, in response to Peter?

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

The response seems so severe! Peter could be forgiven, we think, for having a few reservations about the change in the script. At the very least, he doesn't want to see his friend die!

But, Jesus clearly sees a stark and dramatic contrast between **divine things** and **human things**.

Like many, I used to think that "divine" things were "spiritual things," as if Jesus was saying, "Peter, Peter, you're focused far too much on this world. What you need to realize is that I have to die on the cross to kick into place a cosmic transaction whereby God can forgive your sins and welcome you into heaven when you die."

Or something like that. Many Christians throughout history have interpreted this passage in very dualistic ways, as if Jesus was saying, "forget about this miserable old world, Peter, I have heaven on my mind!"

But when we read this story in context, it seems clear that these are not the "divine things" Jesus was talking about. At least not exclusively.

Human things were the things that the people of Israel, and everyone else, were very familiar with. Violence. Domination. Power. Control. Status.

This is how the kingdoms of men were attained, how they were maintained, and how they were preserved.

And Jesus, in rebuking Peter, labels these things for what they are: satanic.

“Satanic” is a very strong word. But recall what the devil tempted Jesus with in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13).

Power. (*Turn these stones into bread!*).

Status. Control. (*Worship me and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world!*).

Renown. Influence. Admiration. (*Throw yourself down... the people will follow you to the ends of the earth, for all people love a spectacle!*)

These are the things that empires have always been fueled by.

Human history was and has been a long string of empires based on these very things. Persia, Babylon, Assyria, Rome... Each, looking and sounding the same. Each honouring power, strength, status, worship, violence, the ability to impose one’s will on another.

That’s how empires looked then, that’s how they look today. I read a statistic this week that said that America has been at war in one place or another for 222 out of 239 years since 1776.

Violence, power, fear, control – these have always been the tools of the kingdoms of men.

But Jesus came preaching not the kingdoms of men but the kingdom of God.

And the kingdom of God not only *looks* different, but it comes about in different ways.

It comes not through the violent imposition of force, but by self-giving love and sacrifice.

It comes not through a mighty military commander, but a servant.

Its victory is achieved not through triumphant force, but through suffering.

It is a kingdom not of fear and clinging to control of others, but of love and of freedom.

It is a kingdom that takes all the kingdoms of men and turns them upside down, breaking the cycle, exposing them for the small and fleeting things that they are.

Every kingdom that human beings have ever dreamed up eventually, inevitably, fades away, giving way to another.

But the kingdom of God endures, it grows and it flourishes even in the midst of the kingdoms of men, always showing an alternative to the death and the dead-ends of the “human things” that the world has always been so attracted to.

Divine things are not like human things.

Divine things lead, ultimately, to life, even if it might not always look like it at the time.

Peter certainly didn’t think so. Neither did the rest of the disciples. They were very slow to have their minds turned to divine things.

Human things don’t easily give way to divine things. We see this repeatedly in the gospels.

Only a chapter later in Mark’s gospel—a chapter after hearing about the path Jesus was taking, and about the upside down nature of his kingdom—the disciples get into an argument about who was the greatest among them.

Jesus reminds them those who want to be first must be last (Mark 9:33-37).

A chapter after *that*, James and John ask if they can sit at the right and left side of Jesus in glory.

Jesus has to remind them, again, that this isn’t how things work in the kingdom of God.

Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. **43 But it is not so among you**; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. **45** For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

We could pick more examples. Over and over, we see Jesus reminding people that the kingdom of God looks different, that divine things are things like “last” and “slave of all” and “suffering.”

The kingdom of God is bottom up, not top down.

It grows slowly, persistently, unobtrusively... Like tiny little seeds, scattered on the ground... Like yeast in dough...

Divine things look different than human things.

What about us?

I suspect the words from this passage are familiar to many of us. We hear words about “taking up crosses” and not clinging to our lives and about being prepared to suffer, and maybe we think, “well, yes, in theory.”

But it’s hard to imagine the stark realities that Jesus is talking about from the comfort of our mostly comfortable Western lives.

And yet, every day Christian sisters and brothers around the world are following Jesus into great suffering, are choosing to deny themselves, to lose their lives in order to gain them. In places like Syria and Libya and Nigeria and others, these are not abstract words. This is reality.

And regardless of whether or not we will ever literally be called upon to give our physical lives for Jesus, all of us are called to give our whole selves for the gospel of peace.

Each day, in our relationships with one another, in our workplaces and schools and communities families, we must decide which things are we will set our minds upon.

Divine things or human things.

The way of clutching and grabbing and status and power or the way of the servant?

Status and recognition and influence or rejection?

Jesus is clear that following him is not the doorway to “the life we’ve always wanted.”

Far too often, churches get into the habit of selling Jesus as a kind of “top-up” to our already pretty good lives. Jesus will provide a bit of transcendent meaning for our lives, a bit of spirituality, a belief structure to make sense of things...

But this is far less than what Jesus offers, far less than he demands. Jesus will not be domesticated like this. He is not a spiritual guru looking to help us on the journey of self-discovery on the terms of our choosing.

No, Jesus doesn't offer us the life we've always wanted.

He does, however, offer to retrain us into the kind of life that we should be wanting in the first place.

A life that will last. A life that is stronger and truer and deeper and more eternal than the ones we cling so fiercely to. A life that is spent in the service of God and others, not on the fortifications of the self.

A life that is prepared to enter into suffering because this is the road that God himself walked, in order to bring new life.

Which brings us to this table....

