

Mark 8:31-38

Where: Caesarea Phillipi (Las Vegas) Gates of Hades...Kingdom of man stronghold.

During Lent ask yourself... What does it really mean to be a disciple of Jesus? After Jesus' baptism, He spends 40 days in the desert denying himself and asking himself - what does it mean to be Jesus...what will I choose to do with my life given my gifts and talents. Follow my will or God's will?

And now we ask ourselves a similar question...what does it mean to follow this Jesus? Do I follow my will for my life or God's will...And the answer to that question is just as unacceptable today as it was back then!

During the Roman occupation of Israel, the oppressed Jews were looking for a higher power to come in and set things right...setting up themselves as the new and improved power of course! Cause they would be the Good Guys and then they would win!

They were looking for another deliverer like Moses or a new King like David...why would anyone ever look for a suffering and dying Messiah!

God wouldn't lose to the world! They wouldn't follow a loser...they were looking for an epic hero...This kind of talk would be nonsense to the disciples! It's nonsense to us now? The person we claim to follow loses to those in power (at least in the way the world defines winning and losing in the kingdom of man)...

Suffering, rejection and death are not part of Peter's agenda...does anyone of us willingly move forward to rejection, suffering and death. In fact we go to great lengths to avoid these things don't we?

... as if they weren't part of life's equation here on earth.

The disciples then would be focused on regaining the good ole days when they had the Prestige, the Power and the Dominion...they would

take down the Empire and of course replace it with a new and improved Empire...theirs!

...you may not realize this but it only took one generation...one generation for David's dream of a united and powerful Israel to lose its way and ultimately reflect the corruption prevalent in the kingdom of man. Power will always corrupts us...ALWAYS...no exceptions!

...and now more than 2000 years later has anything changed here in the kingdom of America?

What do we expect from God today? What do we pray for...God's will be done or our will be done? Is our focus on God and others... or really just on helping ourselves? What do we truly desire? What does our nation truly desire? I often wonder what in fact is God's desire...

We can get into all sorts of trouble when we start to confuse these things don't we...are we created in God's image or are we just creating God in our image!

That's the crux of it all...that's what is meant by are we living for the kingdom of man or for the kingdom of God.

It's a quandary between what I would like to call the self vs the ego. Our true self, that which is eternal... vs our ego... that which is circumstantial and created by the world we live in... by us and for us.

The self is who we are in creation... and the ego is how we impose our will upon it. Self contains our true potential and purpose...Ego is what we think and believe our potential and purpose to be here and now.

There's a cool story from the ancient Indian text the Bhagavad-Gita that illustrates what I am talking about here.

“Like two golden birds perched on a tree, the ego and the self are united companions:

One eats the sweet and sour fruits of the tree, while the other looks on without eating.

As long as you identify with the ego, you will feel attached to both happiness and sorrow.

But if you know that you are the self, the lord of life, you will be freed from suffering.

You will transcend duality and move into a state of Oneness.”

Our ego then is an idea that we cling to, that identifies our self to our self. And this is very useful for allowing us to enjoy and experience the world around us here, however, sometimes it's like not seeing the forest for the trees... we become our own point of reference.

Egocentricity is when we believe that the universe revolves around OUR reference point and that the truth is born only from our point of view...

This turning inward towards our ego (Satan) is what can disconnect us from God and each other...we can tell when ego is in control by our beliefs. Dr Wayne Dyer identified six ego beliefs that we use during our lifetimes to define who we are:

Ego says: I am what I do (my profession)

I am what I have (my stuff)

I am separate from God

I am what others think of me

I am separate from everyone else

I am separate from what's missing in my life (if only...)

Ad these assumptions can severely limit our experience of truly living.

How do we begin to shift our awareness from our ego to our true self?

Jesus says it like this “you must lose your life to save it. What good is gaining the whole world but losing your life in the process!”

Remember Jesus focuses on where your heart is (your true self)... in particular those two great commandments: Love God and love one another.

This has to do with the distinction between identifying with your true self (connected to God and creation) rather than identifying with your smaller and limited ego. Revealing the Kingdom of heaven rather than living into the temporary illusions created here by the kingdom of man.

The ego then is what separates us from God and one another. Because our bodies are finite and fragile, and because our “life” SEEMS temporary we become “self” absorbed. We focus more on the material and the outer container rather than the spirit and energy that is contained within it.

Focusing only on the outer container gives rise to pride, envy, insecurity, self-loathing, narcissism, vanity etc...

And note also that organizations, cultures, and nations can also be “ego” driven. “Group think”, a psychological term is where beliefs are based on inclusion and exclusion. Many different countries, especially ours, can become self-absorbed, egocentric, and materialistic.

Denying our ego has always been our problem ever since creation... and this plays itself out way back in the Garden in Genesis. The tyranny of our ego is such that if it’s all about us then we will never - ever take up a cross... especially for someone else.

Remember, in the first century the cross was not a cool piece of jewelry or an ideal... it only meant one thing: humiliation, pain, and death, at the hands of those in power...and the cross was the ultimate expression of “Don’t ever mess with the real power over life and death around here!” That’s Rome... Today...Any Empire...you fill in the blank!?

With ego in control we will forever seek shortcuts to the Kingdom of God. We will try to substitute any other way to avoid a cross.

In Peter's mind they signed up for a new David's throne... ruling the other nations with righteousness, power and might! Isn't that just what our own Christian Nation sees itself doing today as well!?

See they signed up for a crown... not a cross! They were solely focused on themselves and their group's movement... not on the health and wholeness of ALL of God's creation.

Would we, like Peter, also rebuke Jesus if we were truly asked to take up a cross and follow Him?

Yet that's what we all signed up for in Baptism...be careful what you wish for...everyone wants the prize but not many walk the talk. Satan the great accuser...the deceiver...Ahhh the ego - has always seduced us with a mirror into our own earthly wants and desires for ourselves...regardless of the cost to others.

We look for fame, recognition, glory, power and status...we want the world to tell us how great we are...and how fickle that world can be?

IN one day...And OUT the next!

Now to be honest, I don't know anyone, including myself, that willingly embraces taking up a cross...taking up the pain and suffering of the world. No...see we all prefer kingship...even Jesus when facing his own death asked God for a cross-less death...Father if it is possible take this cup from me!

Unfortunately, it's not how it all works. We all have our own crosses to bear, we all have pain and suffering in some measure...and ultimately, we will all face death won't we.

Pain, suffering and death are all part of the equation...the cycle of birth/death/recreation...The thing about this world is that no one gets outta here alive!

The real question is, do we enter into this world in order to actually be transformed by it or not? To lose our life here...in order to find it in greater measure beyond this fleeting experience on this planet!

To die here only to find life everlasting. Giving up the finite to realize that the infinite awaits us.

Peter's rebuke is that of all of us...the use of power and might to make things right...unfortunately what is right to some... may be very wrong to others. The way to glory for some leads to suffering for others. The way of earthly power always leads us into a disconnected, self-centered, and myopic perspective of God's creation.

And Jesus continually points us to a much greater connected reality.

The son of man MUST suffer, MUST be rejected by the ways of power and this world. MUST Die and WILL rise again...Peter, like us all, would have the Messiah take a more traditional roll. We all want God's power to forcibly take on those that oppose our will and then we win...and we always see ourselves as the good guys...everyone does!

Having a winner though always means having others lose (eg in order for 1 team to win the Superbowl, 31 teams have to lose...and then it begins all over again)...see we think as man...not as God!

Take up your cross and follow me...Disciples must also suffer and deny themselves... removing their ego from the center of creation, relinquishing earthly power and status in favor of God's will and serving one another.

There was a man who put all his wealth into his home. He elaborately furnished it and collected unique works of art. He threw amazing parties to proudly show it all off. His house reflected all that he held most dear. One day a fire took it all away. Has this man lost himself or found himself???

Years later he rebuilds his life and is able to recreate much of his former success, he is very proud of all that he has done... Later that year the man lies on his deathbed....Is this man lost or found???

Lord, make us instruments of YOUR peace...and YOUR will.

Let us show forth through our lives... YOUR will for creation...For it is only in giving... that we receive; it is only in forgiving that we are forgiven; and it is only in DYING... to this world... and to our ego... that we are born to eternal life.

Your faithful servant,

carmen