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# Self-Idolatry

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A Sermon By  
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February 25, 2018  
The Second Sunday in Lent  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2018-02-25-AAA.mp3>.

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16  
Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25  
Mark 8:31-38

Our appointed gospel passage today begins at the 31st verse of the 8th chapter of Mark. But, it really shouldn't. It should begin a few verses before that, because the passage we hear today is best understood in the context of the story that immediately precedes it. That story goes like this... "Jesus went with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah" (Mk. 8:27-29). Our gospel reading today is Jesus' response to Peter's confession that Jesus was God's Messiah.

Peter, having made the profound proclamation that he believed Jesus was the messiah, probably had some expectations about what that messiah-ship entailed for him, for Jesus, and for their nation. It is likely that he expected the Messiah to be a new king, like King David, who would overcome the nation's enemies, expand the borders of Israel, and establish a rule of justice for God's people. And he, Peter, probably would have had some glorious aspirations for what that might have meant for him as one of Jesus' right-hand men. Perhaps he would be entrusted with a position of responsibility and leadership in the messiah's new kingdom. Maybe he would ascend to a higher social sphere. Surely, he would help cast out the Roman overlords and the gentile riff raff that accosted his homeland. The possibilities that awaited the messiah's followers must have seemed endless!

But, in our gospel reading, Jesus shuts down that way of thinking pretty quickly. Jesus tells his followers, and all that are gathered to hear him speak, that he is destined for an execution rather than a coronation. Instead of anticipating following a conquering hero, his disciples were to prepare to participate with him in his suffering. Jesus foretells his death and resurrection to try and get the disciples to understand the Messiah's true nature and mission.

But that vision, Jesus' vision, was unexpected and unglamorous. It was a different take on the role of God's messiah. And it didn't sound super attractive. Denial of self, cross bearing, suffering, and death? It's easy to understand Peter's reaction, maybe even to sympathize with him, when he rebuked Jesus for speaking about such things. Peter probably wanted to protect Jesus, and himself, from the future that Jesus described.

It's sufficient to say that Peter and Jesus weren't on the same page. Peter didn't understand where Jesus was coming from. At this point in time, Peter didn't comprehend the type of messiah that Jesus was. He just didn't get it, because why would the messiah need to suffer and die? That didn't resonate with Peter's understanding of messiah-ship, or his hopes for it. Where was the glory, the restoration, the power? Where was the kingdom of God to be found in suffering, rejection, and death?

Of course we know that it was through his death and in his resurrection that God revealed Jesus' power and glory. It was through suffering, rejection, and death that Jesus overcame these things and made it possible for us to overcome them too through him. We know that Jesus' story didn't end with his death or even with his resurrection, but Peter didn't know any of that yet. He couldn't break out of his own limited understanding to really process what Jesus was saying. Peter was stuck in his own plans, so much so, that he couldn't really hear Jesus' plan. And he probably thought that his plan sounded better than Jesus' anyway. Peter was focused on his own ideas, to the point that he made an idol of his views.

If I'm honest, I have to say that I frequently fall into this trap too. Like Peter, I can become inflexible with my opinions. I can be stubborn and hardheaded, slow to listen and comprehend. I make generalizations. And at times, I fool myself into believing that my truth ("t") is the Truth ("T"). I find that I act like this especially over issues that I'm passionate about. If someone says something I disagree with or posts something on social media that rubs me the wrong way, I begin to compartmentalize, generalize, and separate myself from them to protect myself and make myself feel comfortable.

And I'm not alone. Our country has a reputation for this kind of thing. It's become common practice to idolize our way of thinking/being/loving/looking above that of others. This creates a safe comfortable cocoon, in whose incubation we fool ourselves with feelings of superiority. My thoughts are better than someone else's. My ideas are correct. The threat with this kind of thinking is that it's not that far of a next step to thinking that not just my ideas are correct, but that I am correct, I am better, I am superior to something else or someone else. We know where this kind of thinking can lead, the extremes of what can happen. We've seen its horrendous effects on our society – white supremacy for example, classism, elitism, and so on.

Jesus' response to this kind of thinking is a stark reprimand. He tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mk. 8:33). When we make idols out of our own perspective, when we generalize and separate for our own comfort; we set our minds not on divine things, but on human things - flawed and broken human things. In doing so we expand our own brokenness and quite possibly contribute to the brokenness of others. We miss the mark.

This is not what God wants for us. Jesus tells us what God wants. He says, "deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). Maybe we can think of that command like this: deny yourself the conviction of self-righteousness. Deny yourself the freedom of shutting others down. Take up the practice of looking inward to change your behavior. Take up the desire to connect rather than disengage. Be honest with yourself. Look to Jesus and follow the example he has set, for his was a life of intention and connection.

In order to do these things, we have to look inward. We find ourselves in a season that is particularly geared to this very thing. In Lent, we are invited to confront the times that we have missed the mark. We are invited to confess the times we've made idols of our ideas or ourselves at the expense of our relationship with other people and with God. We are invited to repent and to change our actions. We are invited to make reparations for the wrong we have done. We are invited to take Jesus' words to heart – to focus on divine things, not human things, to take up our cross and follow him. We have the opportunity to do some difficult internal work, the rough work of conversion. Jesus has issued the invitation, or rather the mandate. Will you respond like Peter, protective and stubborn, or might your reply be different?

Jesus still loved Peter, even as he rebuked him in the strongest terms possible. Jesus loved him but he called him out on his self-centered, limited, way of thinking. Like Peter, we have the love of Jesus no matter what, but we are called to behave differently, to engage differently, to accept Jesus challenge and be transformed.