

Sermon: Changing our minds
17 Pentecost, Year B
Mark 8:27-38

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Have you ever changed your mind about an issue or about someone? What did it take to actually change it? Maybe you read something, learned the facts. Maybe you moved somewhere and saw people doing things differently. Maybe you traveled to a foreign land and experienced a new way of life. Maybe it was simply hearing someone say something that you were ready to hear.

This week as Hurricane Florence was approaching Wilmington, NC, some local governments were issuing warnings to get out of the area, move to higher ground. In some areas there were mandatory evacuations. Wisely, millions of people hit the road. I believe some of you here today are refugees from that affected coastal area and relatives of some Emmanuelites. We are happy to welcome you here! And yet some folks chose to stay put. At first glance it seemed ludicrous that people would not heed the warnings of a then category 5, and eventually category 1 hurricane and remain at home near the coast. But some of the folks interviewed told the news reporter they wouldn't be leaving because they couldn't afford to leave. They didn't have the money for gas or extra food, much less for a room to rent. I think some of us who heard that story changed our minds about the seeming foolishness of someone who wouldn't evacuate. So often it is in hearing someone's story that we are able to change our minds about an issue or about a person.

In today's passage from the Gospel of Mark the disciples were challenged by Jesus to change their minds. The disciples had been with Jesus for a good while now. As they had spent time with him they had displayed an amazing lack of understanding again and again as to who he was and how he operates. Throughout the first eight chapters or so of the Gospel, Jesus' followers misunderstand – a lot! They fail again and again. In today's passage we have the culmination or climax of the book in Peter's answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" **And Peter says?** "You are the Messiah."

The reader is left thinking, "ah, at least one of the disciples gets it! Peter is correct in his identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ." But ***then what does Jesus tell them to do next?*** He tells them to zip it! To be quiet! This silence Jesus calls for is sometimes referred to as the Messianic Secret. While there are a number of scholarly theories that offer possible explanations as to this injunction toward silence, I wonder if Jesus is encouraging the disciples to watch, to listen and to learn, to be willing to change their minds about who he is in its fullest sense.

Jesus proceeds to tell the disciples just what his messiahship would mean. No, it wouldn't mean what they thought it would mean. He would not be a political leader; he would not be a powerful, royal messiah. Nor would Jesus be a successful military leader. In Jesus' messiahship "might will *not* make right." His messiahship would be a very different kind of power, the power of service to others, the power of sacrificial love. He teaches the disciples that he is on the way

to rejection, suffering, and being killed, and then will rise again. In order to follow him, they would have to change their minds. They would have to set their minds on divine things rather than human things. To focus on the matters of God they would need to let go of their previous notions of what Jesus would do for them. To be Jesus' followers, they would have to deny themselves and take up their cross, the cross of sacrificial love.

But poor Peter wasn't having any of it. He couldn't stand to hear what Jesus was saying and he pushed back. They had a verbal tussle. And Jesus rebuked Peter right back! "Get behind me Satan." The word Satan can mean "stumbling block." **Why might Jesus call him Satan?** Peter was blocking Jesus from his mission; Peter was *in* the way of Jesus. When Jesus said "get behind me", he was talking both spatially and theologically. To follow Jesus, Peter needed to get behind him! And obviously Peter needed to learn or to change his mind about who was in charge here!

How do we get behind Jesus and follow him? How can we change our orientation so that Christ is the center of our lives, the focus of our attention?

End with prayer: Gracious God, like the disciples we don't always get it right, don't always understand your ways. Help us be open to changing our minds when to do so is to turn toward you. Help us to follow you, to serve you with a sacrificial love, looking for what is best for the whole, rather than just our individual desires, seeking the greater good rather than our self centered interests. Help us recognize we are connected to the whole of your creation. Amen.