

# “Mobility and Belonging”

a sermon by

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Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 16:9-15, 31-35

New Testament Lesson: Mark 8:27-37

Our New Testament lesson this morning comes from the book of Mark 8:27-37. “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?” 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.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

As you know we just returned from Russia this past Tuesday. And there is a funny common denominator that I’ve noticed among all of our church partners around the globe who I’ve had the great good fortune of meeting as your mission minister. It is no profound revelation on mission or poverty, just an observation, really. What I’ve noticed is that the people that we work with in the mission field- be they pastors, parishoners, students or seminarians, children or adults- have absolutely no interest whatsoever in what any of us Americans do for a living. They really just don’t care. I realized this when I was prepping our Russia mission team two Sundays ago for the worship service that we were to participate in at Hope Church in Ryazan, when we’d been asked to introduce ourselves and share a little bit about our faith journeys. I found myself telling our group that the congregation always wants to know about their families, how they came to faith, and how they are involved in our church back home, but really not so much about what they did for a living and, just a little fyi that the words “lawyer”, “banker”, and “businessmen” were all considered dirty words in Russia because of rampant corruption. So, the lawyers, bankers, and businessmen on our team would have to get creative if they were going to talk profession, so it’s probably best just to avoid the topic altogether. Just so you know, my husband discovered that “human resources” doesn’t translate either.

So what do we say about ourselves when we can’t talk about our profession? It’s tough, really. Think about the first question you might ask someone you are seated next to on an airplane when making idle chit-chat- “so, what do you do?” As a minister, I dread this scenario because telling people that I’m a pastor on an airplane invariably yields one of 2 results- either it frightens the person next to me and they mumble sort of an awkward ‘oh’ and stare out the window, or it gives them license to either list all of their religious accolades or unload all of their religious baggage on me even though you’re allowed only one carry-on. A friend of mine suggested that the next time someone asks me this question on a plane, I should just tell them that I’m in life insurance. Conversation over.

In America, I think it is safe to say that the first thing out of our mouths were someone to say, ‘so, tell me about yourself,’ would have something to do with our profession or our perception

of our life's vocation, or, perhaps, something about the roles we fill. When I answer the question, I say, 'well, I'm a pastor, I'm married- so I'm a wife- and I have 2 3-year old Boxers (so of course in my mind that makes me a parent!).' I've shared with you my profession and some of the roles that I fill, but really, does that tell you anything about who I am? Are any of those really my identity in my core? To answer the question apart from my vocation or the roles that I fill is much more difficult- it is first, much more intimate, and it requires more vulnerability. 'So, tell me about yourself.' Well, honestly, I struggle with keeping the most important things in life first. I cry when I read the newspaper. I have a quick temper when it comes to justice issues. I have faith in Jesus Christ and that faith has changed . The answer is different if I take away any word about how I function, and really stop to think about who I am. It is not natural and it is not comfortable, but it is real. I don't think it's that our friends in mission mean harm by their disinterest in our professions that are so much a part of who we are here in America, I just think that it doesn't even cross their minds that such things would ever be so important to us- that our identities would be so wrapped up in them. They are operating off of a totally different framework- Why would we tell them about what we do, when they want to know about who we are- about what is most precious to our hearts and spirits and in our lives?

So what do we do with the fact that, for at least a portion of the world, our vocations and our experiences and education surrounding them, and all the other ways that we may consider ourselves useful to others by how productive we are or what social networks we've built, or all the other trimmings of our lifestyles are considered utterly meaningless and completely irrelevant to the core of our identity? What if that were actually true? Put another way, how do you understand who you are apart from what you do?

In some form or fashion, this question is at the heart of the drama behind the exchange between Peter and Jesus that we just observed. Because Peter and Jesus are operating on two very different frameworks and those come into conflict with one another. Who are you, Jesus, and what are you going to do? Those are the questions that the disciples are seeking answers to. If Jesus was the Messiah, then he was to be the most public figure Israel had ever anticipated, and yet Jesus tells them to keep his identity secret. The Messiah is the one that will usher in a new day for Israel- he would dispel poverty, lead Israel in military triumph over her enemies, and pronounce the lordship of the God of Israel in a way that would be undeniable in the eyes of the entire world. Along with the title 'Messiah' comes a heaping job description and everyone has been waiting for him. But instead, Jesus tells them that he, the Messiah, must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by all the people he's supposed to be seeking the approval from- the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Jesus took all of Peter's expectations- all of Israel's expectations- and turned them upside down. And then chastised Peter for setting his mind on human things rather than the things of God.

Jesus was challenging the disciples with a concept that was completely foreign to them and is, largely, to us as well- foreign, and, as we saw in Peter's reaction, even a little offensive. Jesus was challenging the disciples to not only accept from him but also to emulate for themselves what Henry Nouwen calls downward mobility in the spiritual life<sup>1</sup>. "If any want to become my

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<sup>1</sup> Nouwen, Henri, *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life*, (Orbis Books:Maryknoll) 2007.

followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

Downward mobility. Not something we hear a whole lot about today. Certainly not something that anyone strives for. So what is it? You may recall the time in the gospels when Jesus said that if a man asks you for your cloak to give him your shirt as well. Well, he may have been suggesting that everyone give all their articles of clothing away to anyone who asks until we're all left standing naked. But another reading might also be that you are to give the man not only your cloak but your shirt as well because, as one whose identity is fixed in Christ, they are of no consequence to who you are in the depths of your soul. So when you are free from your spiritual attachment to them then you are also free then to do with them as you wish because your identity is rooted elsewhere. And their power over your life is destroyed. In fact, as Peter discovered, the power of anything over your life- even the fear of rejection, suffering and death- is destroyed. Because nothing in this world can take away the most important thing- the truth that you belong to the heart of God.

The Israelites knew the experience of downward mobility very well. They were given a crash course in it when, for 40 years, they traveled through the wilderness in exile and lost all ability to provide for themselves, to set up any means of industry. In that literal and spiritual journey their identity was stripped to the core, and they were left with no means of identifying themselves as a people other than as 'those who wander through the wilderness in hope of the Lord.' Out there in the wilderness there was only them, and their reliance upon God. And that was when God gave them bread.

Some of you have heard me say that when I was working as a chaplain at a large trauma center in New Jersey a few years ago, the story was told of a Jewish woman who was being treated for a vicious cancer who was suffering from a deep despair. Despite her doctor's encouragement that she would actually recover from her illness, she believed that she had no hope for survival and refused to eat a thing. They tried everything to get her to eat, but her depression had killed her appetite, and in her weakened condition her health took a sharp turn for the worst despite a positive prognosis. Her doctor, one of the finest in the field, was confounded by what to do because her anxiety and fear had eroded not only her body, but was burrowing its way into the very depths of her soul as her interest in life faded radically by the day. Early one morning he stood in a small bakery when he spotted a loaf of freshly baked Challa. Challa is the bread traditionally eaten on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath. Baked and beautifully braided, a portion of it is burned to recall the Passover feast of the Jews, and the sacrifice in the temple they made to honor the Lord for the good things he has done for them. He purchased the loaf and took it to his patient. As he sat beside her bed he reminded her of the story of God's provision for his people in the wilderness, of the manna from heaven that was provided to sustain them when they felt alone and afraid. He recalled for her the celebration feast they share even today when they remember the story of God's promises and the faithfulness of his blessing those 40 days and throughout history. And he watched as tears streamed down her face when he handed her the freshly baked loaf and said, you do not give bread to those for whom you have no hope. When she went home from the hospital a strengthened and fully recovered woman, she gave the doctor \$5 and asked if he would be sure that the patient who stayed in that bed after her received a loaf of bread and heard the story of God's provision for their lives and, if they felt so moved, would buy a loaf for

the person who came after them. The scholarship for bread has grown so much that today a loaf of freshly baked Challa is delivered to every Jewish patient in that hospital each week on the eve of the Sabbath.

When God gives us bread it is his way of saying that, no really, it is enough to hope in me. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses says to his people, "Yahweh made you feel hungry and fed you with manna which neither you nor your fathers had known, to make you understand that people do not live on bread alone but on everything that comes from the mouth of Yahweh." Bread is God's assurance to us that, come what may, the core of who we are is fixed when it is fixed in him.

Bill Wood once said that you cannot define yourself by anything that another person can take away. When we follow after the way of Christ, and venture down that counterintuitive path of downward mobility that says that when we lose ourselves for Christ's sake we will find ourselves, then we can trust that we will find him there. If we have learned anything from our faith, we should know that we are not our profession, our employment status, our address, our appearance, our golf game, our country club membership, our charity, our usefulness, our square footage, our addiction, our education, our influence, our acceptance, our checkbook registry, and a thousand others- when we strip all these things from our understanding of our core identity- that is the beginning of true transformation in the Spirit. A transformation that concludes when you rest in the fact that you are at your core Christ in you. And that core is fixed. So you can be free from fear when you find yourself cast out onto wilderness roads because who you are as a child of God cannot be moved. It cannot be unnerved by anxiety, or touched by recession. It cannot be shaken by illness, or devalued by the economy, or dismissed at work. When the core is fixed, there is only Christ, and flowing out of that place, then, is your life- the life of Christ in you. The question is not 'where am I going' or, 'What am I doing with my life.' The question is, 'to whom do I belong?' And the challenge to us is to grow in our understanding that the answer to this question is enough.

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"<sup>2</sup>

Let us pray. Lord give us strength to rely on you as the source of who we are, and all that we will ever need. Thank you for setting a table before us where we might be nourished by your promises and where we may taste and see that you are truly good. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:17-21