

Psalm 31:1-5, 9-10, 14-15a ~ Mark 8:27-38 The Message Bible
Into Your Hands
 September 16, 2018 – Service of Ordination & Installation
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Introduction to Gospel Lesson

Today's gospel text is pivotal. It is a hinge point in the Gospel of Mark, after which Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem and to his death on the cross. The question that Jesus asks his disciples, and Peter answers, gets to the heart of what it means to follow Christ. Peter didn't like it. Peter's struggle in this story spotlights the turn we are called to face daily if we say that Jesus is *our* Lord and Savior; as two of our members who are about to be ordained and installed will say later in today's service. What is this soul-saving turn? Listen for it now as I read Mark 8:27-38.

Sermon

"Who's driving?" Do you ever have this conversation in your family? It can happen between spouses or partners; between teens (with those shiny new driver's licenses) and their parents. And then, much later down the road, between aging parents and their grown-up adult children. Not an easy conversation, at any age. I don't know about you, but I can tell you that I love to drive. O Let me count the ways: In the driver's seat, I get to choose the route we take, the speed of the car, the style of driving, the ventilation settings, and the in-car entertainment, what music or podcast we all get to listen to. Oh yes, who likes to be the driver? Hands? I can still remember the teenage thrill of my first experience behind the wheel. And more recently, I have engaged in the tense conversation with my parents, about the necessity for them to limit and then finally to give up driving all together. My mom talks with relish about the driving she was still able to do into her late 80's.

Did you see the argument in our Gospel text between Peter and Jesus about who would drive the car? OK, I'm taking another metaphorical leap, but so did Eugene Peterson in his Message Bible rendering of this passage into everyday language. If we are honest, it's a struggle that most Christians face every day. Here at FPC, we are blessed with the visual of the cross right here, front and center, to remind us of what it means to follow Christ. Jesus plainly tells his disciples and the crowd along with the disciples, if I am your Lord and Savior, first you must "Deny yourself, take up your cross." The Message Bible gets us in the car saying, "Let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat, I am."

Did you hear the soul-saving turn Jesus is preaching to the disciples and the crowd? I hear Jesus calling us to reset our minds, like he told Peter to do, to reset our minds from human things to divine things. Jesus spells it out for Peter and the crowd quite plainly. It is a path that we may not like at first. It is a path that will not let us look away from the pain of the world. It is a path that leads us into the eye of the storm. Jesus' way of love is counterintuitive. It disconcerts and disrupts everyone—Even Jesus, as he faced what lay ahead for him in Jerusalem.

But the turn is into the hand of God, where we admit to God honestly, "No, we don't know, and yes, you do. No, we may not like what you are asking us to do, or how we are supposed to change, but we trust that your way of the cross, is what will save us." This is what makes us Christians: The uniquely Jesus, cross-taking, self-sacrificing way of Divine Love.

Maybe because of Peter's A+ answer to the question, "Who do you say that I am" he felt emboldened enough to rebuke Jesus in the heat of that moment. Peter did not like, did not understand this trajectory of suffering, rejection, and death that Jesus just laid out for them. "What? That's crazy talk. You are the Messiah who just multiplied a few loaves of bread to feed 5,000 people one day and then turned around and did it again for another 4,000 people.

What's this suffering and rejection talk? You are the Messiah who does miraculous healings! You are the Messiah who silences the best teachers with your astounding new teachings, that's the Messiah *I was confessing*. Not the one that's going to go down suffering and humiliated. You could be any kind of Messiah you want to be. Come on: Be the politically powerful empire take-over kind of Messiah! Why on earth would You, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, *choose* the path of humility: suffering, rejection and death—as the only way to resurrection and victory?

I don't think Peter was the only one that day on the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, who did not like, did not understand Jesus' prediction of his path forward. Nor is Peter the only one in our sanctuary today who does not like, does not understand the path that Jesus chose: A life of "downward mobility ending on the cross?"ⁱ A choice to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel? Who does that? Is this really the only path that leads to resurrection?

Jesus' command to take up *your* cross means something different for each of us. However the turn to which we are all called can be summed up in one word. It's really the only word you need to remember from this sermon. The one word is **decentering**. That's right, making room for Jesus in the center; keeping the center clear for God in Christ. If Christ is in the center then we are not. Decentering is the path that leads to the healing path of salvation for each of us and for all of us. It was the hard lesson that Job learned through suffering and near death. It was the hard lesson that caused the man known as the "rich, young ruler," to turn away from Jesus (Mark 10:17, Matt. 19:20, Luke 18:18). It was too much for him.

What about us? Decentering: It's that simple and that complicated. If we want to be like Jesus, if we want to be more loving, if we want our nation and our world to move toward justice and peace for all of God's creation, if we want what God wants, if in our hearts we are praying, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done"—then we have to move over. Like Jesus on the cross, like the Psalmist wrote, "Into your hand, I commit my spirit."

If we believe, like Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, we are saying, “yes” to the daily challenge of decentering ourselves. We are saying, “yes” to doing our best to make the turn when we wake up each day and say to ourselves, “today is not about me, it’s about Christ.” If we want to be a Christian: We have to try to look at others as Christ does. We have to intentionally reset our minds from “human things” to “divine things.” Whether we like it or not.

I hear Jesus’ call to decenter not only as individuals, but also *as a nation*. We, the USA, are not the center of the universe, nor is any other nation. We, and every other country, are a unique part of this one little planet revolving around one minor star in the galaxy of God’s creation. Whether we like it or not, we are all interconnected economically and politically. Yes, this whole planet that God sent his only Son to save over 2000 years ago. How is that going for us? How is that going for God? We may look at the ways our democracy is struggling for its soul here in the US and around the world and be tempted to be critical and cynical and do nothing about it. As Christians, we do not have this option.

Why? Because Jesus’ was crucified for confronting systemic evil. His death on the cross was a political and public execution. Therefore, to follow the way of Christ, to be true to the cross of Christ, Jesus is calling us to take an active role in civic life. To “take up our cross,” by definition, is not only about our personal salvation and relationships, but is also a clear call to political engagement. Like Peter, we may recoil at this. But if Christ is the Messiah we confess, the One who went to the cross to save and reconcile the world; if we want to follow Christ, we don’t have the choice. We cannot retreat behind the comfort of our church culture, or be content to simply babble within the bubble of people who think like we do.

How do we reset? How do we reset our minds from human to divine things? Jesus tells us plainly in Mark 8:34. A whole course, “Decentering 101” right there in one verse. So simple and so complicated; and so often misinterpreted. I want to clarify one common Christian *misperception*: denying ourselves is *never* a call or a justification to be abused or mistreated. God is always, always on the side of healing. Denying ourselves is a choice we make, not one that is made or forced upon us.

Rather, denying ourselves, putting Jesus in the driver’s seat, challenges us to develop a humble heart that allows us to listen to other opinions, and the very differing perspective of others. Denying ourselves call us to hold our wants, and our needs loosely, letting the wisdom of Christ form and inform our way of looking at others and ourselves. You can practice this in small ways when you are driving (yes☺), in line at the grocery store, in conversation with your best friend, and in chance encounters with a stranger on the street. Practice “decentering” by stilling your mind and listening, really listening. And when Jesus calls you to speak: speak the truth in love; and muster the courage to act accordingly. There’s Jesus’ way and there’s our way.

When you're walking toward the car with the keys in your hand, ready to accelerate in the "Me First" direction, remember to make the turn, by giving Jesus the keys, and saying, "OK Jesus, I'm putting myself into Your Hands."

In your bulletin is a cream color insert with Charles de Foucauld "Prayer of Abandonment" printed on it. This is a gift for you to take home and to put it on your refrigerator or bedside table or desk—it is a prayer to help you make this turn. It is a prayer that has been helping me with this turn since I was in my early 20's when I had no idea what God had in mind for my life. Let's end this sermon together, by praying it now. You can address God, with the original, "Father" or with "Mother, Christ, or Spirit" – God cannot be contained by a single name or metaphor.

Let us pray:

Father, (Mother, Christ, Spirit)

I abandon myself into your hands;

Do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you:

I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me,

And in all your creatures.

I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;

I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,

For I love you Lord, and so need to give myself,

To surrender myself into your hands, without reserve

And with boundless confidence,

For you are my Father (Mother, Christ, Spirit).ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Henri J. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1989) pp. 81-82.

ⁱⁱ *Prayer of Abandonment*, Father Charles de Foucauld