

PETER'S DECLARATION ABOUT JESUS: HEARSAY OR EXPERIENCE

Proverbs 1:20—33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

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"Who do people say that I am? "... 'But who do you say that I am?'" Mark 8:27, 29

Forty-one years ago this past August, at the beginning of tenth grade, I went out for the Newark High School football team. I had dreams of being a football hero. I didn't know what I was getting into. I went to pick out my uniform. I didn't even know how to put on the shoulder pads. I put the waist pads on backwards. I had visions of touchdowns and tackles and receptions and interceptions and glory and victory. Then came summer football practice and I got 100 degree weather. 100% humidity. Calisthenics that I barely endured. Wind sprints until I literally dropped. Not what I'd expected. I expected glory. I got blood, sweat and tears. I sat on the bench for two years before I got to play for any length of time my senior year. I didn't know what I was getting into.

Those of you who are married, when you got married, did you know what you were getting into? When I marry people as a pastor, I do premarital counseling. I point out to the starry eyed couple that marriage isn't all romance. You make promises in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health as long as you live. On your wedding day, did you realize the promises you took meant putting up with irritating habits that you discovered your spouse had that you'd been unaware of? Did you know those vows meant that you'd go to the movies and endure romantic comedies when you prefer adventure? Did you know those vows meant sharing washing the dishes, dusting, and vacuuming? Those of you who are married, did you know what you were getting into?

Many of us didn't know what we were getting into when we entered the work force, or when we first had children, or when we went away to college or into the armed services or moved to a new home. We had no idea.

The Apostle Peter had know idea what it meant to confess Jesus as the Messiah. Prior to his confession there had been tumultuous weeks and days. Wonderful works had been performed -- the hungry were fed by the thousands, the blind had sight restored, the dumb were made to speak. As a result, an emotional wave was everywhere mounting among every group -- the common people, the religious leaders, even the disciples. The

question was, "Who is this man? He heals the sick? The wind and waves obey him? Is he just a carpenter from Nazareth, or is he something more?" Then, in the quiet company of his disciples, the issue was raised by Jesus. "Who do people say I am?" Then – "What about you? You know what other people say but what do you say?" Peter – bold, boastful, loud Peter replies, "You are the Christ."

Peter had no idea what he was saying. He had visions of glory. The restoration of the royal line of David. The independence of Israel from foreign domination. The rebirth of Israel as a military power. And, for Peter, perhaps a prestigious post in the Messiah's kingdom. That's what Peter thought. But Peter didn't really know what he was saying. The words were right, but the expectation were wrong. And Jesus quickly set Peter straight. He began to teach 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. "Before the glory of resurrection, I must first go through the shame and pain of crucifixion. Before Easter Sunday comes, I have to go through the valley of the shadow of death on Good Friday. And Peter, if you really want to follow me, you must deny yourself and take up your cross."

Some of us have heard Tony Campolo preach a great sermon, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming." I won't try to imitate the sermon. But essentially – It's Friday and Jesus is nailed to the cross, but Sunday's coming. It's Good Friday for us, we're going through tough times, but Sunday's coming.

But in our Scripture lesson *today* Jesus is preaching a quite different sermon. It goes like this, It's Sunday, but Friday's coming. It's Sunday, and you're confessing your faith in me for the first time, but Friday is coming. It's Sunday, and fresh in your memory is the feeding of the five thousand and the stilling of the storm, but Friday's coming and I'm going to be crucified. It's Sunday, and you're all aglow with hopes for my kingdom, but Friday's coming and you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.

And for us, today is Sunday. Twelve new members are publicly professing their faith. But Friday's coming and Christ calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross in self-sacrificing service. Today is Sunday and we're baptizing five children. ^{5 baptizet} But Friday's coming and you're going to have to pray with those kids every night before they go to bed and model for them what it means to follow Christ every day of their lives and bring them to church and Sunday School.

Peter confessed his faith. He believed in Jesus but he didn't really understand what he was saying. Not yet. He came to understand but only after Jesus was rejected and crucified. How many of us knew what we were getting into when we joined the church? How many of us understand *now* what it means to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Christ every day of the week? How many of us realize that when we join the church that it requires us to deny ourselves sometime. So don't be surprised when our cheerful secretary calls and asks you to prepare a dinner for a sick person. Don't be surprised when Joan Appleton calls and asks you to be a greeter. Don't be surprised if you're asked to help with the Apple Festival or visit a shut in or send a card to a home-sick college student or teach Sunday School or help lead a youth group or walk in the CROP walk.

None of us really knows what we're saying when we profess faith in Jesus Christ until we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. Do I sleep in this morning or do I deny myself, get up, and go to Sunday School and church? Do I deny myself and take a few vacation days to work on a Habitat for Humanity project? Do I deny myself, rethink my priorities, and give a tithe of my income to the work of Christ and his kingdom? It's impossible to know what we're doing when we confess Jesus as Lord, unless and until we actually deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

God of mercy:

Help us to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily
and follow you in your redeeming work;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.