



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

The Problem with Being Right

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 8:22-30

March 6, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a season of the Christian calendar when we invite ourselves to reflect on our own discipleship. How closely are we following Christ? Some of us give up chocolate or push desserts away—and sometimes—simple, tangible practices like that can help us think about our faith and the way God calls us to sacrifice for the world. But at the same time, it's helpful to remember that nowhere does Jesus say, "Give up sweets and follow me." Christian life is about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. We use this Lenten season to reflect where and how our trust in God shows up in our lives. The wisdom of the Christian calendar returns us to this season every year because living Christian faith is something we never complete. We never really get there. There's always more to learn, to experience, to practice. So, we return to this Lenten season again and again.

And this Lent, there are daily reports of war as Russia invades Ukraine. And nations, including our own, engage in the calculus of how to respond without making things worse. And we hear reports of Russian soldiers who were apparently told they were coming for peace, only to discover they are invaders. We hear reports that there are more than a million refugees as women and children desperately try to escape the violence. In a story all too familiar, we hear that the Black citizens of Ukraine are being pushed to the back of the line. Of course, refugees trying to escape violence is not new. It's been part of the newsfeed for years.

And then, at a high school not far from our Antioch campus, a kid with a gun created a moment. I don't know what he was thinking or how long he thought about it, but he made a bad decision. But guns have a way of making choices not completely

thought through become permanent decisions. There are too many kids who have to tell the story of where they were, and what they felt, and the fear they now know. They shouldn't have to tell that story, but there are too many guns and they are too easy to get.

So, it's Lent. This first Sunday of Lent we visit this passage that is a turning point in Mark's gospel. Everything shifts in these verses. Now, I know you heard an amazing sermon on this passage last Sunday. I hope you know how fortunate you are as a congregation that you have a pastor who woke up last Thursday attending an out-of-town conference, who returned to staff the MLK event in the Sanctuary last Saturday, who got a call Thursday afternoon that said, "I need you to preach..." and with just a few days' notice, preached like he did last Sunday. That doesn't happen everywhere. I'm thinking about throwing my back out on a regular basis.

Rodger focused on the healing of the blind man; how Jesus wants us to see. It took two touches with this blind man. After the first touch, he could see, but not very clearly. He needed a second touch. In the next moment, Mark tells us Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?"

How would you answer that question? Who is Jesus today? Is he the miracle worker that Mark knows so well? Is he reduced to some kind of feeling—a man who makes me feel good about myself? Is he a morality teacher? A man of wisdom? Is he the future; a glimpse into what it is to be human?

"Who do you say that I am?" he asked. Peter raises his hand. He knows this one. "Ooo, call on me," Peter says. "I know, I know!" "You are the Christ. You are the Messiah." Same word; *Messiah* is Hebrew, *Christ* is Greek. They both mean the promised one of Judaism. Peter says, "You are the one God has promised all along. You are the Messiah."

Now a word about Mark's gospel. If I understand the text, Mark places these two stories—the healing of the blind man who requires a second touch, right next to the confession of Peter—because Peter also requires a second touch. In Peter's story, he sees Jesus, but not completely.

Peter is right, that Jesus is the Christ, the promised one of Judaism. But Jesus is also the Son of God and Peter doesn't see that. To fully see Jesus, to see Jesus clearly, Peter will need a second touch. He and the blind man are just alike.

Well, except the blind man knows he doesn't see clearly. Peter, on the other hand, has no clue. He assumes the truth that he sees is the whole truth. That's what gets him in trouble.

My grandparents on my father's side lived in a small village in South Carolina named Batesburg. They lived there for the better part of 70 years and most of that time Dr. Johnston¹ was the only doctor in the village. Dr. Johnston did everything from give flu shots to deliver babies. He set his share of broken bones and even pulled a few teeth in the early days. Things weren't so specialized then. Dr. Johnston did everything, until he retired. When Dr. Johnston retired, Dr. Shealy took over his practice. Dr. Shealy had grown up in Batesburg. He had gone off to college among the Ivy Leaguers and got his medical training from Johns Hopkins or some such.

But when my grandfather needed a check-up, for the first time in his life, he paid the extra gas money to drive to Columbia to see a doctor in Columbia.

"Why don't you just go see Dr. Shealy?" I asked. My grandfather said, "I've known that Shealy boy since he was a boy and he wasn't a very good boy either."

"Well, he's not a boy anymore and he's a doctor."

"Do you know that he had to repeat Ms. Amick's fourth-grade class? He failed math."

"Well, I think he rebounded pretty well; he graduated from Harvard."

"Well, I don't know about Harvard," he said, "but I'm not going to any doctor who can't pass Ms. Amick's fourth grade."

Sometimes when we know we are right, it can

really mess us up. My grandfather never truly saw Dr. Shealy. Not because what he saw was wrong; it was just *incomplete*.

When it comes to seeing Jesus, most of us are a bit like my grandfather. We know Jesus. We have been hearing about Jesus all of our lives. But we may not see Jesus as clearly as we think.

If I understand this passage, it is an invitation to humility. To take a moment and look again, and ask: Who Jesus is today? Like Peter, we all need a second touch at one time or another.

When I was a kid, there was a guy who did infomercials. He would show up on late-night television and with tireless enthusiasm, he would talk to you about his newest invention that you just had to have. This was before that guy who hocks Flex Seal today, and before, who was it, Billy Mays and his commercials on OxiClean. Before them was Ron Popeil. He lived to show you his Ronco Pocket Fisherman. Or the kitchen gadget that would change your life: the ever popular Veg-O-Matic. Like he was speaking of salvation itself, he would promise the Veg-O-Matic would chop your onions perfectly without shedding a tear. Or could be used to make mounds and mounds of what...? Julienne fries.

As he carried on about the features of his product, he would interrupt himself to say, "But wait, there's more... wait, there's more!"

Well, if I understand it, Chapter 8 is the 'Ron Popeil' moment in Mark's gospel. Peter says, "I know you are the miracle worker. You are the one who has come to make everything right. You are going to make everything good for us. I know who you are, you are the Messiah..." And Jesus says, "Wait, there's more. I need to talk to you about love that will sacrifice and stop at nothing."

I said that everything changes now—for Jesus now begins to tell those who follow him about the cross. Jesus has known about it from the beginning, but for his disciples, this word about the cross comes slowly.

This Lenten season, defined by the violence of war and the violence of school shooting.

This Lenten season, where poverty is common and those struggling to buy gas and food as inflation

¹ Johnston is not his real name, but he was a real man and a real doctor. Batesburg is also a real place, as is South Carolina!

climbs find themselves treated as political opportunities rather than neighbors who need things to change.

This Lenten season, when in our public discourse, rudeness and verbal hostility are rewarded and confused with patriotism.

This Lenten season, we stop and ask ourselves: Who is Jesus to us? Who is he today and how are our lives shaped by his love? Because who we think he is shapes how we live.

That's why I am so grateful that the first event to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. held in Prairie Village was held in this sanctuary. We declared that all people are welcome here.

It's why I am grateful to those of you who set up a home last week for Afghan refugees. We declared that war does not destroy kindness.

It's why I am grateful that our high-school students will leave this week for the Dominican Republic because while they are there, I will be surprised if they don't see Jesus more clearly.

It's Lent and we want to see Jesus and it's a good thing, too. Because I imagine that as soon as we are comfortable that we know who he is, as soon as we are confident we know the extent of his love, as soon as we have figured out where his love shows up in this world, I wouldn't be surprised if he says, "wait there's more... and you wouldn't want to miss it."