



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Lent 2
Year B**

More Than Fixing

[RCL] Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Blessed Saint Peter: author of Scripture, first Pope, chief Apostle, teacher and defender of the faith, pillar of the Early Church, purported benefactor of the Gospel of Mark, and martyr. It is little wonder that Saint Peter gets so much good press amongst Christians!

But there is one thing missing from this list. One thing, in fact, that is among the blessed Apostle's greatest gifts: Peter had the unique ability to find precisely the wrong moment to say the wrong thing! Or, to put it another way, Peter was an expert at opening his mouth and inserting his foot!

Listen to it again:

“Then [Jesus] 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 of this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him...”

Now at first, we might be tempted to think that Peter simply forgot himself a bit—that he got so caught up in the thought of Jesus' death that he spoke out of turn. But if we were to back up just two verses before the beginning of today's Gospel reading to verse 29, we would hear Peter answer Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” with certainty and affirmation: “You are the Messiah!”

And so, seemingly without giving it a second thought, Peter professes that Jesus is the Messiah one minute and scolds him like an irresponsible teenager the next. One might imagine that the other disciples watched this scene unfold anxiously, as children watching their brother or sister arguing with their parents at the dinner table.

But it's what happens after all of this that is truly shocking.

Jesus says, “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.”

That's the moment that Peter and the disciples realized that the God they wanted was not the God made known in Jesus Christ! The disciples wanted a God who would be a savvy political and military leader, leading the charge to put the Romans in their place once and for all. They wanted someone who would

raise them up to a position of power and importance. And they wanted someone so radical that their enemies would cower and flee. They were convinced that the keys to a good life were strength and power.

Instead, they got a guy who taught about loving others, feeding the hungry, and foretold his own impending death at the hands of the very same powers he was supposed to overcome.

This was not what they had signed up for!

With this in mind, it's a bit easier to understand why Peter was so upset; if we had been standing where he and the other disciples were standing, we might have been upset, too!

But then again, who among us hasn't wanted a God who just swoops down at the first sign of trouble and sets things right?

We ask God for a good parking spot; we pray for winning lottery numbers; we long for the phone call with the news of a better job or the approval from the bank for the new car or the bigger house, because in one way or another, we believe that if we can just get a little bit ahead and become just a little more successful, or if we could amass just a little clout or influence, our lives would be much better.

The disciples weren't the only ones who believed that the keys to a good life were strength and power. More often than not, we believe it too.

But this attitude about God also shows up in places that aren't so self-serving. When tragedy strikes, we pray and pray and pray for a different outcome, and yet God seems far away from us. Those of us who have been at the bedside of a friend or family member who died much too soon often find ourselves staring into the cold, dark silence of death, feeling abandoned by God. Coming to grips with the end of a long relationship with a lover or a friend causes us to wonder about this God we worship.

"Why doesn't God just fix all of this?" we wonder. If God loves us, why do we suffer so terribly?

But as Mark's Gospel reminds us, if we are to confess Jesus as Messiah, we must do so by standing at the foot of the cross as he is crucified. The God we worship is about more than fixing our lives. The God we worship is about laying down his life for the sake of our own.

And the moment we allow this truth to penetrate deep into our souls is the same moment we realize that the suffering we see around us—in the hospital bed, in the prison, on the street, in the mirror—is none other than the crucified Christ laying down his life again and again in the midst of our suffering.

"If any want to become my followers," Jesus said, "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Taking up our cross means recognizing Christ crucified in the suffering world around us, and then recalling that true discipleship is paved by the way of our own cross.

But walking the way of the cross and proclaiming Christ crucified isn't the end of the story. No, it's just the beginning! The story continues on, through the resurrection of Easter, and even to this day, at this very moment!

But we cannot know the fullness of Christ's resurrection unless we are willing to know Christ crucified. The Great Fifty Days of Easter find their meaning only after the solemn forty days of Lent. Easter morning finds its consummation only through Good Friday.

And so, as we continue our journey through this holy season of Lent, may we walk alongside one another, bearing our crosses and proclaiming the faith of Christ crucified—the faith of militant love. Of subversive grace. And of radical mercy. And may our hearts be filled with the sure and certain hope of the resurrection!

Amen.

The Rev. Marshall A. Jolly is Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Morganton, North Carolina. He is the editor of ModernMetanoia.org—a lectionary-based preaching resource authored exclusively by Millennial clergy, lay leaders, and teachers. Marshall is also an amateur runner, a voracious reader, and a budding chef, all while completing a doctorate at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Most important and life-giving of all, he's Elizabeth's husband.