

In today's scripture lesson, we continue to journey with Jesus and it is in this scene that he and the disciples enter the region near Caesarea Philippi. And Jesus has a question for his followers while they are on the road to the rough and tumble region where they are headed. He asks his followers: "Who do people say that I am?" And the question Jesus asks is a question that has to do with perception. People who are on the outside—who only know me by reputation—what are they saying? The answer Jesus is looking for is a measure of the effectiveness of his ministry.

So they told him: "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets."

Fair enough. But then he turns to Peter. Poor Peter.

Peter as you may recall has a name that refers to stone. Jesus calls him Peter because Peter will be the rock on which the church is built. And yet, we see Peter's human failings throughout the Gospel. He sinks like a rock when Jesus asks him for the faith to walk on water. His heart is as hard as a rock when he denies Jesus three times after his arrest and trial.

And here, Jesus asks Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter answers correctly: "You are the Christ."

Jesus, you are the anointed one, the one sent by God, the one who the Israelite people have anticipated coming! You are the messiah. And yet, Jesus once again orders the disciples not to tell anyone about him.

We see this Messianic secret woven throughout the narrative in the gospel of Mark. And it reminds us that the love of God is just so good, that we cannot possibly keep it to ourselves.

Peter loves loving Jesus. So when Jesus begins to teach about the grim realities that are yet to come in his ministry, Peter just loses it.

He goes off on Jesus. Peter scolds Jesus for having these dire predictions of rejection, death, and suffering, and then Jesus loses it on Peter saying, "Get behind me Satan!"

Can you hear the escalation of misunderstanding between these two?

Peter's stone is not in his belief and not yet in his heart, but it's in his head. "You are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts," Jesus tells him.

The blockheadedness of misunderstanding, the refusal to see the truth through the eyes of Jesus, it becomes a stumbling block to our faith and our love of God, even when we rationally think we are acting out of faith and love for Jesus.

And so Jesus teaches us (and Peter) to let go.

Let go of preconceived notions.

Let go of rigid expectations.

Let go of the human thoughts and focus on Godly thoughts.

Really following Jesus is a risk taking mission.

Following Jesus means saying “No” to the self, and “Yes” to the cross and all that comes with it.

It sounds very cryptic for the Son of God to say, “. . .all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them.” But that’s what each of us needs to figure out for ourselves on this Christian journey.

Salvation as we each experience it, is and will be unique for each of us, and this is why John Wesley, the founder and perfecter of our Methodism described Salvation as a way of life in addition to an instantaneous time of conversion. Simply because we are so very human, we are capable of being overcome by the wickedness and sin of the world.

What made me lose it this week was reading about the children across the nation who are being incarcerated in our own country due to the questionable legal status of their parents. We do not yet know the full scope of what kind of emotional trauma we are placing on children who are being separated from their families but we as Methodists are called to be a part of that healing—that salvation that only Jesus can provide—that kind of salvation that comes at a cost to one’s own life for the sake of others.

And what makes me think that these are holy thoughts and not just human thoughts, is a question raised by my friend and clergy colleague the Rev. Dawn Wilder. She said, “Where in heaven are babies locked in cages?” When your friends defend the policies that unjustly separate families, cause emotional trauma to our most vulnerable through detention and red tape, you ask them; “Where in heaven are babies locked in cages?”

In the time of industrial revolution during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we saw Methodists standing up for kids as fervent and active opponents against child labor. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, globalization has declared war on kids.

A very famous Methodist once said, “It takes a village to raise a child,” but times have changed in such a way that we now must begin to rally the global village to say, “it takes a **nation** to raise **our** children.”

God’s love for us is what leads us to advocate for God’s love and grace for those who are most vulnerable.

So I want to know: How do we stop the institutional, governmental, and illegal abuses against kids in our day and age? How might I have to lose my life in order for the most

vulnerable among us to gain life, and therefore find life again. It's the story of resurrection faith, friends. In our baptism and in the remembrance of it, we die with Christ to rise again in new life with Christ. Thanks be to God!

As Christians, the symbols of God's love for us are demonstrated in the sacraments of Holy Communion and in baptism. These sign acts are physical, tangible ways of comprehending the magnitude of God's love and care for us. Baptism is an act that does not happen in a vacuum and ideally, it is an act lived out in shared community.

Our journey toward discipleship begins with baptism. When we baptize an infant or child, we are initiating them into the community of God's people. We mark them with water, symbolically recognizing before the community of faith that even though they do not yet recognize it for themselves, God's grace is within them. We pray for the Holy Spirit to guide them on their journey. And we covenant as a community of faith to show them, by our example, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ so that one day they will experience God's saving grace and make a confession of faith in Christ for themselves.

Do you know that we come to this place not only to worship and adore God, but to also receive God's love and adoration of us? To be on the receiving end of God's love means trusting in that love. It means trusting that the voice that came from heaven saying, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." is not just for Jesus Christ but for all people who take their baptism seriously and live out God's calling in their own life. Do you know that no one can take away your baptism? Absolutely no one. You are claimed by God. Always.

It is said that the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther in times of great difficulty would touch the water and then his forehead saying repeatedly, "I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized." This remembrance of his baptism provided him the blessed assurance that no matter what he faced in this life, he first and foremost, belonged to God. You too belong to God. The encounters we have with God and one another in this journey of life are meant to be shared. And your pastors, your fellow Christians, we are all here to help each other live up to our end of the covenant God has already made with us. May we all remember our baptism and be thankful.

[Go behind altar table for Thanksgiving Over the Water]

Let us pray.

[The pastor may raise hands in the ancient Christian posture of prayer, and invite the congregation to do likewise.]

Eternal Father: When nothing existed but chaos, you swept across the dark waters and brought forth light. In the days of Noah you saved those on the ark through water. After the flood you set in the clouds a rainbow. When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt, you led them to freedom through the sea. You brought their children through the Jordan to the land which you promised. In the fullness of time you sent Jesus, nurtured in the water of a womb. He was baptized by John and anointed by your Spirit. He called

his disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection and to make disciples of all nations. [The pastor may place hands in or over the water, stir the water, or lift the water.] Pour out your Holy Spirit, to bless this gift of water and those who receive it, to wash away their sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives, that, dying and being raised with Christ, they may share in his final victory. through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.