

Holding On by Letting Go

by Teresa Anderson Franklin
for Friendship Presbyterian Church
September 15, 2024

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”²⁸ And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”²⁹ He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he 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.³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.³⁵ 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.³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

There’s an urban legend that to catch a monkey all you have to do is set a simple trap – a tethered and baited gourd or coconut shell with one opening, just large enough to allow a monkey’s hand to slip in, but not big enough for his full fist to be pulled out. Viola! Monkey trap. The first monkey to grasp a handful of tasty bait – peanuts, dates, whatever – is caught by his own fist, because he won’t let go of the prize he thinks he’s won even when the hunter drops a net over his head.

Unfortunately for us, people can be trapped in similar fashion. We see something we want and we grasp it, not realizing the strings that are attached. Then the grip we hold on the thing we desire holds us captive for as long as we refuse to let it go.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson from the middle of Mark, Jesus reveals the trap in which his disciples are already caught: their desire for and expectation of a victorious Messiah.

The word *messiah* is found only a few times in Hebrew Scripture, and never as a proper name, the way it comes to be used in the New Testament. But the handful of references to 'an anointed one' and others to a faithful servant leader led Jews of Jesus' time to expect that God would one day raise up a mighty king from among them, a descendent of David, who would gather Israel, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, and establish a powerful earthly kingdom. The Messianic hope Peter expresses here in his confession of Mark 8 seems to be based on this 'winning' version of Messiah, like God's anointed of Psalm 2, who'll "break (the nations) with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel," (Ps 2:9) or of Isaiah 11: "the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious." (Is 11:10) Either way, Peter's response to Jesus' prediction of suffering and death reveals that *his* expectation of Messiah is not one that includes submission, or pain, or disgrace. Rather Peter's dream for Jesus seems to be honor, power, dominion, and a glorious mansion large enough to share with his closest friends.

I think Peter is genuinely surprised when Jesus turns his rebuke back on him. "Get behind me, *Satan*?' But I'm the one who just called you *Messiah*."

Yeah, Peter, you may have found the right word, but you've still got the wrong idea. I suspect this is the reason Jesus "sternly order(s) them not to tell anyone about him." Because if these disciples start spreading the news of Messiah prematurely – based on their current understanding of Messiah - others will grab onto the earthly kingdom expectation just as Peter has. Then how will they be able to see that the 'Son of Man' *is* the 'Son of God,' just not the kind of savior they expected?

Peter is the monkey now, with his hand caught in the coconut, holding tightly to the idea that Messiah can reign in honor and power and glory *without disgrace and*

death. He doesn't want to let go of that dream. He's stubborn, so he'll be held captive by it throughout the remainder of Mark's Gospel. Even up to the time the centurion at the foot of the cross declares, "Truly this man was God's Son," and Peter is nowhere to be found. (Mark 15:39b)

Mark follows Peter's confession and rebuke with some words of wisdom from Jesus: "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."

I took some time this past week to ponder this paradox in light of Peter's preferred version of Messiah – the winning one, not the dying one - and it occurred to me that in order to take a new path, we have to be willing to abandon the one we're on. Some things really are mutually exclusive. I can't fly to Paris tonight if I decide to drive to Houston instead. I could do one or the other, but I can't do both. Jesus could have been the honored king that Peter dreamed his Messiah would be or Jesus could be the Son of Man, despised, rejected and crucified, but he couldn't be both. In Mark 8, Jesus has made his choice, and he's committed to it. But Peter, not so much.

"If any want to become my followers," Jesus tells them, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Jesus calls his disciples to give up *their* preferred paths, the ones they hope and expect lead to honor and security, in favor of Jesus' path, which he tells them plainly will lead to suffering and sacrifice.

An expectation of honor and security on one side versus suffering and sacrifice on the other: it's easy to see why it takes Jesus sixteen chapters in Mark to persuade twelve men to follow him to Jerusalem.

Choosing to walk the way of Christ, even if it doesn't lead to physical death, can be a kind of dying to one's current choice, whatever the nature of that choice, whether noble or ignoble. It isn't that Peter's expectation of a kingly, victorious Messiah is evil; it's just faulty. That isn't the way this story will play out. It isn't the way Jesus will go. Peter is being offered a choice here: he can continue to follow Jesus to self-denial and sacrifice, or he can reject that path and go some other way. What he can't do is *change Jesus' path*. He can't have Jesus as a king and savior who doesn't suffer and die. Peter can't have what he wants. That's his monkey trap. He's fooling himself if he thinks he can actually will it into reality.

Choosing to follow Jesus can also be a denial of other paths for the sake of one. Peter and the other disciples might choose to turn around and go home. There's no evidence that they consider it. But let's assume it's an alternative. Jesus invites them here to continue to follow him on a specific path – a difficult one, but also a true and better one, if you can trust what Jesus says about it.

Which brings us to the significant question of what and whom we choose to trust - where we place our faith. In order to have what God wants for us, Jesus tells us we have to let go of what we want for ourselves. That's hard, because most of us have learned to trust ourselves. God, maybe not so much. How can we know for sure that what God wants is better *for us*?

We can't know, and we won't know, as long as we're monkeys with our fists stuck in coconut shells, grasping what we can never claim, stubbornly refusing to let go of the superficial things that possess us while we forego the chance to gain that which we can in God actually possess – our freedom in Christ.

Freedom isn't the easy road; it isn't the secure road. But it's the only road on which we Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve develop and grow. I believe it's true somehow: she who wants to gain must first lose, because we can't become the people God created us to be until we answer God's call to give up being the people we currently are.

Pray with me.

Gracious and patient God, you know the conditions of our hearts – where we are torn, where we are determined, and where we are trapped. Soften our stubborn hearts, O God, and show us the path to which you have called us. Strengthen us to overcome the lure of our own ambitions that we might experience the freedom of your grace, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.