

Romans 12:1-8

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Matthew 16:13-23

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. ²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' ²³But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

What Have I Gotten Myself Into?

How many times have each of us said, "What have I gotten myself into?" Some of you may have said that after **joining this church**, or after serving

on some committee. We might say that about school, work, or marriage or parenting: "What have I gotten myself into?" **Anytime we commit ourselves** to someone or something, we affirm a relationship with that person or entity, a relationship that involves giving and receiving, and the deeper the relationship, the more extreme the giving and receiving. Our relationship with Jesus Christ is no exception – there is giving and there is receiving. Sometimes we're asked to give an awful lot, and when that happens we may ask ourselves, "What have I gotten myself into?"

I'm sure the disciples felt this way from time to time. They had committed themselves to following Jesus, given up their day jobs to follow their new master, to take him where he needed to go and do what needed to be done. They sacrificed their schedule for his. They sacrificed their safety as well; when people with leprosy were coming near them to receive healing from their master, when their boat was being tossed about in a storm, or when Jesus was knocking over tables in the Temple, or when the Roman guard comes to them in the Garden of Gethsemane, I am sure that all the disciples asked themselves, "What have I gotten myself into?"

Peter had one of those what-have-I-gotten-myself-into moments when, after affirming correctly that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and having been praised by Jesus for saying this, he hears Jesus explain how he must go to Jerusalem and die. Peter and the other disciples and many people in Palestine – particularly the Jews, wanted to see change in the world. I say "particularly the Jews" because their religion was so much at odds with the whole Roman culture that dominated the entire region. Other nations adopted the Roman gods and paid homage to them along with their own gods, but the Romans had to make an exception for the Jews who refused to bow to any god but the one true God that they worshiped; the Jews were stubborn monotheists. And despite the Romans "tolerating" what they considered to be obstinate behavior by the Jews, the Jews still felt that Roman culture was polluting their own culture. In today's Gospel reading we have Jesus speaking to his disciples in Caesarea Philippi, a very Roman city named after the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus and a Roman tetrarch, Philip II. The city was also known as Caesarea Paneas because of the pagan shrine dedicated to the Greek god Pan, located in a cave that was believed to lead into the bowels of the earth (the gates of Hades) where sacrifices – sometimes human sacrifices – were hurled. It is here that Jesus affirms his identity as Son of God – a title also claimed by the Roman emperor – and as the Messiah, a Jewish title assigned the one who would liberate the people from unrighteousness. It is here that Jesus designates Peter as the one to lead his church.

And Peter must have felt momentarily thrilled by this promotion. "Great. Jesus has put me in charge!" Peter has seen what Jesus is capable of doing. Peter sees how popular Jesus is with the common folk. Peter probably imagines a future as Jesus' right-hand man kind of like Joseph was Pharaoh's right-hand man. He might be thinking of a luxury condo in downtown Jerusalem, of wearing the finest robes and dining in the finest restaurants once Jesus has expelled the Romans and taken his place on the throne of David, or in the Temple as the Messiah, the actual Son of God. Peter must have been starry-eyed dreaming of his own future glory when Jesus says, "By the way, I'm going to be arrested and killed in Jerusalem."

TIME OUT, JESUS! This was not part of Peter's fantasy. If anyone was going to be arrested and killed it would be the corrupt Temple authorities or the Roman soldiers. Peter thought he had signed up for a liberation movement, not a suicide mission. Surely Jesus had the power to free his fellow Jews, to liberate their homeland, and to bring back the good old days of King David – that was what Peter meant when he called Jesus Messiah and son of the living God. And so Peter tries to persuade his Master to do it his way, only to be rebuked in the sternest manner, and be left wondering, "What have I gotten myself into?"

In the church we quite often make affirmations of faith; we say who we believe Jesus to be. I intentionally included such an affirmation in today's worship service. And I think, like Peter, we often make such affirmations without realizing exactly what we're saying. Is Jesus really our Lord? And if so, are we really willing to do things his way and not insist on our own way? I always get a little warm under the collar when I make this affirmation, because I realize that if all of this is true, if Jesus is indeed my Lord and my Savior, my behavior should be a whole lot different. Just the first phrase, "You are Lord," is a mouthful. If Jesus is my Lord I should be doing a lot better job obeying his commandments. If I believe Christ to be my Savior through whom I have eternal life, and if I believe God to be, in essence, love, and if I believe that it is God's will for me to love others as he loves me, then my affirmation of him as Lord has a very hollow ring to it. And since my actions don't reflect what I affirm in my words here at church, I can't help but ask if I really believe it.

And herein lies the challenge for me, for us, for the Church today. Do we *understand* what we confess, and if so, does it show? Do we act upon our belief? Jesus did not drive the Romans from Jerusalem or the corrupted officials from the Temple only to see one army replaced by another army, one set of corrupted officials replaced by another set. Jesus hung on a cross and rose from the grave to demonstrate to us that God's love is more

powerful than any army or any politician. His love is more powerful than death. Do we believe that? Does our behavior indicate that?

We live in a world not unlike the world that the disciples lived in. Though we don't refer to the dominant culture as "pagan," it nonetheless is; there are plenty of idols, plenty of gods to consume us, to lead us away from righteousness. There is wealth, there is pride, there are drugs we can ingest to instill temporary euphoria. There are plenty of idols that have succeeded in drawing millions of people away from worshiping the one true God. And there are people today who cry out for justice, for righteousness and are often ignored or suppressed. The challenges we face are no different from those faced by the disciples and the people of Judea two thousand years ago. One of the challenges is not to be absorbed into a culture that is self-serving and not God-serving. The other challenge is to pursue and obey the will of our Master, Jesus Christ. And we are just as prone to seek the wrong remedy to our cultural woes as Peter was. Are we setting our mind on divine things, or are we setting our mind on worldly things? The challenge of the church is to be the body of Christ so that others will recognize that we are following our Lord's will. It's making this place, this fellowship, nothing less than the kingdom of God, a place of peace, of justice, of love so that the world will be drawn to it and find redemption through it, and it's taking this mission outside of these walls into our world and bringing this good news to others.

If Bethel is a church and a church is the body of Jesus Christ, we should ask those in the community around us, "Who do you say that we are?" Who is Bethel? Will the community identify us with the Jesus who is the Christ, the one who brings healing to the sick, justice to the oppressed, hope to the wayward sinner. Will the community identify us as people who sacrifice our time and our wealth to serve others? I know there are many who will see your desire to follow Jesus, to obey his will, yet we all must humbly confess that there is more that we can do as disciples of Jesus, and we must always believe that by the grace of God we will be able to do those things.

It starts here. It starts now. Like a congregation of a few people gathered in the upper room, it starts small. But like a mustard seed it will grow. It's not easy, and there will still be plenty of times that we say, "What have I gotten myself into?" Hopefully, in time, you will see that you've gotten yourself into a community of love, of care, of grace and forgiveness, of peace and justice. I pray that in time we see that we have gotten ourselves into the true kingdom of God.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord. What have we gotten ourselves into? We pray that you would define that for us. Let us seek your will in this church and in our lives, so that others will look to us and be able to recognize your majesty in this place and in our lives. If there is any ill will within us or among us, we pray that you would purge us of it, cleanse us, purify us to your service that we may truly confess through our words and our deeds that our Lord Jesus is Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Amen.