

## Sermon - "Conversation: A Kingdom Conversation"

Mark 8.31-38

Preparation

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For some of you, you are back in worship after a week of *really praying* the Lord's Prayer, perhaps for the first time. Dr. Davis took us all to a very important place last week—a place where we learn to pause, to not simply say this remarkable prayer, the only prayer Jesus instructed us to pray, but to truly pray it...[[whatever that means!]] We began with the Our Father—unfortunately, that is a difficult one for me. Like some of you, my earthly experience of “father” is not a positive one. I worry, worry that my experience of “father” throughout my childhood and into adulthood will lead me to give my children a negative experience, worry that I too will follow in the footsteps of my earthly father.

But to be honest, this week, the second line in this prayer, I have to pause before this one. “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.” This worries me—I hesitate to pray it—because I'm not sure that's what I really want—I'm not sure if I really mean it.

Benjamin, who is now 5, told us just the other day that God doesn't answer prayers. What do you mean? Well, he said, I have been asking God to make all my toys come alive, and he still hasn't done it. Our son, ready to run his own little toy kingdom! It reminds me of a story Tony Campolo once told. Tony is a preacher and professor of sociology at Eastern University in Philadelphia [who named his two children Bart and Lisa...yes, after that Bart and Lisa.] Anyway, he recalls that one night his son Bart was heading off to bed. He stops at the foot of the stairs, and in the most serious voice you could imagine said, “Ok, I'm going to be praying. Anyone want anything?”

This is often the conception we have of prayer, not just the children among us. It is very difficult for us to understand why God so often seems silent when we pray. Why won't God give me that thing I need so badly, be it a job, a home, a relationship...why won't God heal this person I love so dearly...is God even listening to me?

As we pray through the Lord's Prayer, we continue to wrestle with the idea of having an ongoing and meaningful conversation with God, especially this week as we ask God to bring his kingdom to rule here on earth, in our world today, just as it is in heaven. Is this what we really want?

**The problem is this: If we are going to have a conversation about God's kingdom, we must have it on God's terms regardless of the implications for our lives.**

## Landing Points:

### 1. The Way of the Messiah (8.31-32a)

Our lesson today appears halfway through the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has traveled the countryside with his faithful 12 for a good 8 chapters—a couple years—and here, he drops an atomic bomb on the 12, and on the crowd around them. We remember Jesus' first call to the 12. Simple. "Come, follow me." No detailed explanation of where they are headed, even what they will be doing. And they went, walking with Jesus as he fed the hungry, healed the sick, and exorcised demons.

This teaching of Jesus is not an evangelical message. This is not a call to conversion. This is a call to discipleship—to truly follow Jesus Christ—to emulate him to the world around us. Immediately before our passage today, Jesus, standing with his faithful 12, asks them, "Who do people say I am?", "Who do you say I am?" Peter, the spokesperson of the group, the voice of the 12, speaks up, "You are the Messiah." This is an important moment in the ministry of Jesus and in the path of the disciples. For the first time, Jesus is declared to be the Messiah—and he accepts! After 8 long chapters, many miles behind them, the group is ready to crown their king and march toward the Messiah's throne.

**"Then 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."**

This would be a new teaching, something they had never heard, never considered. This teaching would be simply **UNIMAGINABLE**. I remember clearly sitting in class in middle school, learning the ins and outs of algebra. I remember clearly not doing my homework. I remember clearly having no idea what my teacher was talking about because I didn't understand, or complete the lesson the day before. We've all been in that situation, we can't move on to the next lesson, be it in school or at work or in life, until we have mastered the one before it. For 8 chapters, many miles and many memories, the disciples were not ready for this teaching. Now they are. Many of us in this place have sat in this place for years. In the pews of a Christian church, every Sunday morning, faithfully joining in worship, listening to the word of the Lord. Many miles...many memories. This is not an evangelical message about conversion to a religion. This was a difficult teaching for Jesus' followers.

One way for us to understand what Peter had in mind when he proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah is to remember the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is baptized, and then is lead out to the wilderness for forty days. We observe Lent each year as a way of joining Jesus on his forty-day journey in the wilderness. During this time, Jesus is tempted.

The Tempter says..."Turn these stones to bread" – imagine the wilderness, the desert scene. Stones and jagged rocks everywhere. Back home, hungry people, everywhere. Turn these stones

into bread and satisfy not only your hunger...use your powers to feed the entire world. End hunger, today Jesus.

The Tempter says ...“Throw yourself off the top of this Temple, and when God’s angels rescue you, the world will know that God’s Messiah is here to reign on his throne. Everyone will know, your reign can begin, today Jesus.”

The Tempter says ...“Worship at my feet, Jesus. If you turn toward me I will give you all the kingdoms of the world. Your will can be done on earth as it is in heaven if you’ll turn to me, today Jesus.”

Tempted to feed the hungry and to bring his kingdom to reign on earth as it was in heaven.  
Tempted to sit on the throne and rule as king over all of Israel.

## 2. Conflict (8.32b-33)

**“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering...be killed, and, after 3 days, rise again. And Peter took him aside to rebuke him.”**

Imagine Peter’s shock, the shock on the faces of the 12. Jesus is proclaimed Messiah—he affirms it, accepts the role of Messiah. Then he tells them that his reign will begin with great suffering and defeat at the hands of the powers of this world. Jesus’ words were simply **UNBELIEVABLE**. So Peter, the voice of the group, says to himself, “it’s time for us to have a little kingdom conversation with Jesus.” The text says that Peter took him aside to rebuke him. As *we* read this, it *all* seems simply **UNBELIEVABLE**—here is this fisherman from nowhere not only questioning the teaching and the will of the Son of God, but rebuking him in the process. As we read further in Mark’s Gospel, we find Peter rebuking another group of people—the parents of children who rush to the feet of Jesus. Peter’s rebuke was done with the intent to put Jesus in his place.

Jesus is described as rebuking once or twice as well; in fact, four times in this Gospel, each one directed at a demon or Satan himself. So when Jesus rebukes Peter, “get behind me Satan,” memories of exorcisms come to mind; but most importantly, memories of that temptation in the desert. Jesus is not simply calling Peter evil at his core; rather, the path that Peter has in mind for his Messiah is no different from the promises of Satan, tempting Jesus to skip the suffering and pain and begin his rule with the power and authority of heaven.

It was the philosopher Charlie Brown who once said, “winning ain’t everything, but losing ain’t anything.” Jesus’ announcement to his disciples was that he was going to lose. Peter, thinking rationally and acting in Jesus’ best interest, tries to convince Jesus otherwise. But Jesus turns away from Peter, literally putting this little satan behind him, and addresses the crowd. His initial message was **UNIMAGINABLE** – a suffering Messiah; his rebuke of Peter and of the

traditional understanding of the role of the messiah was truly **UNBELIEVABLE**. Would Jesus' final message to the 12 and to the surrounding crowd be simply **UNACCEPTABLE**?

### **3. The Way of Suffering (8.34-38)**

**“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.”**

This is a problem. Our world, this physical place in which we live each and every day, tells us the exact opposite. We have kingdom conversations all the time. With our accountants, our bosses, our spouses, our government officials. Some of the most transformational kingdom conversations we have today come in the form of self-help audio books [[on our iPods]], [[downloadable]] versions of “7 Steps to a New and Better You” [[on our Kindles]], or conferences and motivational speeches that encourage and empower us to become the best me I can possibly be.

James Arthur Ray is the self-help guru accused of causing the deaths of 3 people who signed up for a “Spiritual-Warrior” retreat near Sedona, Arizona. In fact, on Friday, he posted bail and was released from prison as he awaits trial for manslaughter.

This is from his bio - James Arthur Ray is transforming the way the world thinks. As an internationally-renowned Personal Success Strategist who has traveled the globe studying the thoughts, actions, and habits of those who create true wealth in every area of their life, James delivers his practical teachings to hundreds of thousands of individuals and business leaders every year—JRI (the corporation behind the man) is dedicated to mentoring individuals to create wealth in all areas of their lives: financially, relationally, mentally, physically and spiritually.

Unfortunately, this self-help message is often found within the walls of the Christian church. Kingdom conversations for sure...but whose kingdom are we focused upon? Whose will are we preparing ourselves to carry out?

The philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard says that the greatest sin of the modern church, our most dangerous heresy, is the teaching that discipleship is an option...that following Christ is the work of the super spiritual...all the rest of the world must do is believe, show up on Sundays, and then go about the rest of the week doing their best to function appropriately in the system of the world. He calls this Vampire Christianity—Christians who are only interested in the blood of Jesus for their forgiveness, not the way of Jesus for their life.

CS Lewis puts it like this—Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here

and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours."

This is a difficult teaching, for the disciples then and for us today. Here, would be disciples are confronted with a second call—not the simple, "Come, follow me;" rather, come, die with me. Suffer with me. Give up all that you are and care to be and see reality from the perspective of the king. Everything will change. You will never be the same. You will no longer be in control of anything.

Perhaps there is an easier way to understand this passage. Maybe we should search for some cultural or historical clue that will show us that Jesus wasn't really serious or that he was overstating things for effect. Certainly God's kingdom can't be that different from our own. Certainly, when we have kingdom conversations on God's terms we aren't expected to think only of God's will and desire for his creation. I'm afraid that in a world as broken as ours, any thing less than radical change is not worth hoping for. If we want to truly have a kingdom conversation, if we are serious when we pray "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done," we must give up our human thinking about the way the world should be, about who God should be and how God should be God.

I can't tell you what your cross will be. There's a reason that Christ was general when he said that we would have to carry our cross. For his immediate followers, for some of them, it was quite literal. But for us, for some of you in this room, living with sickness, caring for a sick or dying spouse...and we must remember that even as he made his way toward his crucifixion, even Christ could not bear the weight of his own cross—someone stepped in to help him along. And that is why we gather. We are a community of faith, a family for that very reason. To walk along side one another and bear the weight of each other's burdens. As a community, dying to self should change the way we work together in committees, should change the way we speak about one another—the judgments we make, the gossip we spread. We are trying to become a place where the hurting find comfort.

He knew he wouldn't succeed in college, at least not at that time. He had just graduated high school, wasn't a very good student. For a number of reasons, not the least of which was his concern for justice and the lost and hurting in our world, he decided on a year-long mission opportunity rather than begin his college career. This was not a comfortable opportunity—situated in one of the most dangerous areas in one of the country's largest cities, this yearlong adventure would surely provide a test for him...it could have been harmful, not only for his career and his future quality of life, but for his very life. This situation, rightly so, became a source of fear and concern for his family. I will never forget his mother's response—words that

shook her to the core even as she listened to herself. “It’s one thing when your child says he’s going to follow Jesus—it’s another thing when he actually does something about it.”

May our lives be the greatest interpreter of the scriptures, may our lives be a witness to the suffering of Christ, may our lives live in expectation of God’s kingdom come, and God’s will be done...even now, even here. May this difficult teaching sit heavy on us this week as we continue to pray...slowly, “Our Father...”