

We read, today, Mark's version of the story the Church calls "Peter's Confession." It was not a confession in the sense that we think of "confession." Rather, it was a profession of faith. "Who do you say that I am," Jesus asked? "You are the Christ," Peter said. It was a remarkable statement of faith.

In Matthew's Gospel, which has material not available to the other writers, Jesus tells Peter that such a profession is not the product of human reason or understanding. Jesus said to Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

Matthew's expansion is interesting and invites some commentary and explanation. In response to Peter's faith-given insight, Jesus gave Simon the name, "Peter," which derives from the word for "rock." Jesus was saying, "On the solid rock of faith I will build my church. To say that Jesus is the Christ or the Messiah, in Hebrew, literally, it means the "anointed one," the one chosen by God, is to go, by a leap of faith, where human logic and understanding cannot go. What is the Christ? In Christian understanding, Christ delivers us from the penalty of sin and binds us into the family of God. This is a statement of faith. This faith does not come from human reason, experience or understanding, although these are important in allowing us to realize what God has done. But, faith is a gift of God. It is bound in the mysterious because God is mysterious. That God became flesh is mysterious; that Christ died and rose again is mysterious. That we are bound, by his death and resurrection, into his eternal life is the greatest mystery of all. We believe all this through faith and faith alone. Reason, doctrine, dogma take us only so far. Ultimately, we either leap the chasm of God's mystery by faith, or we do not believe at all. The Holy Spirit leads us along the way and guides our way to faith. We cannot get there on our own. The Holy Spirit brought Peter to the awareness that Jesus was the Christ.

It is interesting that a profession of faith that Jesus is the Christ does not keep us from sinning. Peter, just moments after receiving the greatest of affirmations, took exception with the Lord's comments about the coming crucifixion and argued with Jesus. This got him the harshest of rebukes. "Get behind me, Satan! You are not on God's side at all." Then Jesus began to teach about the cost of following him, the cost of being a disciple. It is the cost of sacrifice, or better said, sacrificial love.

This is really powerful stuff. What does it mean to know and follow Jesus? We have interesting goings-on in our world, today, and throughout history, in the name of God, yet often, the practice of religion has nothing at all to do with God. Certainly, God does not condone violence in his name. There cannot be such a thing as "holy war." There can be "just war," yes, but not "holy war." War cannot be sanctified. Pope Benedict, was

absolutely correct, when, several years ago, he implied that Mohammed's injunction to spread Islamic religion by the sword was evil, pure and simple, but so were the Christian crusades against Islam, and we tend to forget that. Christian pogroms against the Jews were wrong, even though they were encouraged and supported by the church. The Inquisition was wrong, even though its intent was to protect catholic orthodoxy. The danger of any religion, Christianity, Judaism, Islam – all of them – is that practice and doctrine do not necessarily reflect the will of God, even though we think they must. You can't put God in a box, and that is the great dilemma of theology, because theology seeks to explain God. When we do this and then declare the doctrine "orthodox," we put God in a box. Like Peter, even when Christians have the best intentions, it is quite possible to get it wrong. Students of the history of religion know well the pain and suffering that good Christians, good Jews and good Muslims have inflicted on others in the name of God. The same is true for all religions. So, how can we know what God wants of us and live a life that is pleasing to the Lord?

The first thing to realize is that to be a Christian has far less to do with right belief than it does with right living and right being. The goal is not to get the dogma right; it is to live a life that imitates Jesus Christ. A Christian is not someone with the right answers. Rather, he is someone who tries, daily, to be just like Christ. "Right answers" should always be suspect, because our quest for certainty tries to lock God in to the things that seem reasonable and right to us, but these things are often caught up in prejudice and we project our prejudice on God, in effect telling God how he must think. Theological presumption is dangerous, but it is all too common, especially among the fundamentalists of every stripe, or those with rigid doctrinal constructs. What happens is that when we are convinced that we are doctrinally sound, we shut out anything else that the Holy Spirit has to say. To be on a Christian quest requires a willingness to be surprised by God.

The question becomes, "How can we know how to please God?" Studying the life of Jesus reveals the Christ-like attributes that should become our goals, and those attributes reduce, ultimately, to inclusive and sacrificial love for all of humanity. The best question we can ever ask, in any situation, is the question made popular by the evangelical Christians, "What would Jesus do?" If we honestly ask this question, and really seek the answer and conform our own actions to mirror the answer, then we are on the path of holy life. To live a Christ-like life is always a quest, so disciples are always in the process of becoming Christ-like, even though we never really get there. But somehow we find our salvation in the quest.

Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" He says the same thing to us. He calls us short. But then he continues, "If you would come after me, deny yourself. Deny your need for absolutes and certainty. Deny your needs for security. Above all, deny your need to always be right, because there is more than an even chance that you are wrong, if what you think is right is not an expression of unconditional and inclusive love. "If you would come after me," Jesus said, "then take up your cross, and willingness to carry the cross is often best expressed by the unconditional love your neighbor. *Amen.*