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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
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James 3.1-12  
**Mark 8.27-38**

### **A Marked People**

*He 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."*

--Mark 8.34

Every good story has a turning point. The turning point in a story is that place where something happens that sets the scene for the rest of the story. The turning point in a story acts as a hinge—if the turning point weren't there, or if it were different, the whole story might fall apart.

Take, for example, "Romeo and Juliet". Romeo and Juliet are children of the Montagues and the Capulets—the two chief families of Verona, who are bitter enemies. They fall in love. But even the great scene with Romeo standing outside Juliet's window is not the turning point. The turning point comes later. Romeo is banished from Verona and Juliet is forced by her father to consent to marry Count Paris. With the help of the local priest, Juliet comes up with a plan. She will take a potion which will make her appear dead for 48 hours. Then she will awake and will flee with Romeo to live together in happiness. A note is dispatched to Romeo telling him of the plan.

The turning point of the story is when that note fails to reach Romeo. From that point on, we know what must happen. Romeo hears of Juliet's "death", he comes to Verona, kills Paris, takes one last look at his beloved, and poisons himself. Juliet awakes, sees him dead, and kills herself as well. Thus, the tragic ending of that great story. It is easy to see how the turning point acts as a hinge. Had Romeo received Juliet's note, things would have been very different.

It is not just stories in literature which have turning points—real life stories have them as well. I remember a charming one from a church camp that I lead many years ago. On the second night of camp, one of our group of third and fourth graders became very depressed—he

felt that the other kids were picking on him. They were. After some attempts to cheer him up and talk with him, it became clear that he wanted to go home. I called his parents and they talked with the camper, and—keeping the promise they had made before camp—they agreed to come pick him up. His father began the two hour drive from their home to camp.

The camper sat quietly, waiting. His mother and I had decided over the phone that if he should change his mind while his father was en route, then he would stay at camp. As we waited we were trying to gather up the things for this camper to take home with him. The kids had made candles that morning, and the candles were cooling in the kitchen. One of the staff members took him into the kitchen to open his candle. This was the turning point. Carefully the milk carton was torn away from the wax, and revealed a beautiful candle—something he had made himself. His face lit up.

Now, if I have told this story at all well, then you have probably guessed that by the time that camper's father arrived, he had already decided to stay at camp and was asleep in his room upstairs. I shared a cup of coffee with his father and sent him on his way back home alone.

The candle was the turning point. On seeing that candle our depressed camper realized he had been having some fun, and that he had created something of real value. The candle opening is the hinge upon which the rest of the story rests. And it could have been otherwise. Had that candle been broken or somehow ruined as it was opened, I'm convinced that he would have gone home as planned. That is the way it is with turning points—they could have been different, and with them the whole story altered.

This morning's gospel reading represents the turning point in the gospel of Mark. It is a moment that sets the stage for the rest of the story, and without it things might have been different. First of all, it is a turning point for Jesus. It is a literal, geographic turning point. Mark sets the story in the villages of Caesarea Philippi. To us this seems like just another of the many confusing place names in the Bible. But this one may have some significance.

The location of the event tells us something very important about the decision being faced by Jesus at just this moment in his life. He must decide whether or not to head on toward Jerusalem and face almost certain death at the hands of the religious and secular authorities. Caesarea Philippi is a place that stands on the boundary between the Holy Land and foreign

territory. Knowing that he was to face problems in Jerusalem to the south, Jesus could choose to continue his travels to the north, avoiding death and continuing his ministry among the gentiles where he no doubt would have been well-received, or at least left alone.

But Jesus does not decide to go north to safety. This turning point is absolutely necessary if the final outcome of the story is to be achieved. The turning of Jesus toward Jerusalem has to do with the salvation of the whole world, and this cannot be accomplished by heading north rather than south from Caesarea Philippi. There is no route to the Kingdom which bypasses Jerusalem and the cross.

In addition to being a geographical turning point for Jesus, this scene is also a personal turning point for the disciples. His discussion with the disciples at Caesarea Philippi starts out as a more-or-less non-committal general conversation. “Who do people say that I am,” Jesus asks casually. The disciples readily give him the equivalent of the latest opinion polls: “Ten percent say you are John the Baptist, 20 percent say you are Elijah, while 35 percent say you are one of the prophets—35 percent are undecided.”

But Jesus doesn't allow the discussion to stay at the level of opinion polls. He asks a more decisive question and forces the disciples to a turning point in their own thinking. He says, “But who do *you* say that I am?” Now they are not so quick to answer. Only Peter has the guts to say what they are all thinking, “You are the Messiah.”

Jesus pushes them even further. He does not want them to call him the Messiah unless they understand what that title really means. And so, Mark tells us,

...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. He said all this quite openly.

--Mark 8.31-32

This is not what the disciples want to hear. They love Jesus and they don't want him to suffer. Besides, they were looking forward to powerful positions in the new Kingdom, not shared suffering with their Master. Again Peter speaks for all of them,

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, [Jesus] rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! --Mark 8.32-33

Peter and the disciples were not ready to make the turn toward Jerusalem and suffering. They would have Jesus head north to safety. But Jesus insists that this moment be a turning point for them.

The circle of influence does not end with the disciples. It is also a turning point for the crowds who follow along after them. Jesus does not want to restrict his difficult teachings to a small, elite group of followers. Immediately after his confrontation with Peter, Mark tells us,

He 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. 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." --Mark 8.34-35

Up until now, the crowds had been following Jesus without hearing this kind of tough word. They had been enjoying healings and feedings and were becoming quite fond of Jesus.

But Jesus can not be understood by miracles and wonders alone; he must be understood by the cross as well. Not until the cross is understood should his true identity as the Son of God be revealed. That day at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus began to teach the crowd about the true nature of discipleship. He began to make demands of them. It was a turning point.

As Mark's story moves from Jesus, to the disciples, to the crowd, it opens outward and makes room for more people. We are invited in to be a part of the crowd. This moment might be a turning point for us as well.

We are invited to draw near and hear once again the strange truth of the Gospel. When we most desperately wish to cling to life we sacrifice the very possibility of life that is truly rich and happy. When we let go of life we find it.

Are we ready for that turning point? Are we ready to re-order our lives around the priorities of the cross? Are we ready to suffer wrong rather than to use force against injustice? These are the questions forced upon us as we gather with the crowd at Caesarea Philippi. They are questions that push us to a turning point in our lives. Are we ready to take up the cross and follow Jesus?

The northbound road out of Caesarea Philippi looks very smooth and safe. But if we are to hear the good news of Christ, we must be turned south, toward Jerusalem. The rest of our story depends upon which way we turn.