

February 28, Lent 2B (Mark 8:31-38)

Peter has guts. He reproaches the very one he identifies as anointed.

by [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#) in the [February 10, 2021](#) issue

Longtime improv comedy teacher Billy Merritt claims there are three types of improvisers: the pirate, the straight man or woman, and the ninja. The pirate is the one we think of when we imagine an improviser. This is the zany one, fearless and unpredictable, willing to do or say anything in order to get a scene going. John Belushi, at his Belushiest, was a pirate.

When I lead improv workshops for church groups, I like to ask, “Who was Jesus’ best pirate?” Many groups answer instantly, with one voice: Peter. Peter is always full of grand gestures. When Peter sees Jesus transfigured on the mountain, he wants to go right to work building dwellings so they can stay up there and bask in that wonderful feeling. When he tries to rebuff Jesus for washing his feet and Jesus chastises him, he changes his tune: *OK, Jesus, wash my whole body instead!* And when the disciples are fishing together after the resurrection and see Jesus standing on the beach, we know which one jumps into the water and swims in to meet him, rather than just taking the boat ashore.

That go-for-broke attitude traces back to today’s passage. Immediately prior to this, Jesus has asked, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter responds: the Messiah. Barely three verses later, Peter is rebuking him—rebuking the *Messiah*. Jesus is having none of it (“Get behind me, Satan!”), though notably, he doesn’t blanch at the fact of the pushback so much as the *content*: “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

I have to admire Peter’s sheer audacity to argue with—to reproach, even—the person he only moments ago identified as the anointed one for whom countless generations have been waiting and yearning. That takes nerve! I’m reminded of the meme that floats around the ultrarunning community: “Courage is knowing it might hurt and doing it anyway. Stupidity is the same. And that’s why life is hard.”

We can't blame Peter too much for being confused. Good teaching relies on a combination of showing and telling, and up to now, Jesus has been engaged in a lot of showing: feeding 5,000 people, walking on water, healing the sick. Even the teachings of Jesus to this point have been focused on parables, with very little about who Jesus is or his explicit mission. I'm reminded of a preaching professor who would try to help her students rely more on showing than telling. I absorbed the lesson so zealously that my early sermons became beautiful but impenetrable works of poetry-prose. I remember one bit of written feedback: "Yes, we want to show people the mysteries of the gospel more than tell them. But sometimes, MaryAnn, you just need to SAY IT." (Yes, she used all caps.)

Here, Jesus SAYS IT, laying out the path for those who would follow him. It's a familiar call to discipleship, repeated in one form or another in each Gospel. But the four accounts differ. According to Matthew, Jesus assures us that those who lose their life will "find" it (10:39). Luke says we will "keep" it (17:33), and John says we will "keep it for eternal life" (12:25).

Mark's Jesus goes a step further. He is not a finders keepers kind of guy. Our lives are not simply misplaced items needing to be retrieved. Nor are they things to be preserved, whether now or in the life to come. For Mark's Jesus, we are hopelessly lost without God, and when we lose our life for Christ, we will save it. We will be rescued from grave danger and harsh afflictions, delivered from the very throes of death. Spirituality is not something we dabble in for personal enlightenment; for Christians, a relationship with Jesus Christ is a matter of life and death.

"Why is it that every Christian sanctuary has his cross at the focal point," asks pastor Paul Shupe, "while our own crosses are nowhere symbolized?" If we're honest, many of us really don't want this kind of saving. We'd like to continue living as we currently do, just happier—more faithfully would be fine, so long as we stay comfortable. We'd rather not be transformed, but we're willing to be improved. We're not sure about being saved, but enhanced? Yes, please.

In her book *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, Susan Beaumont writes about a member of her home church, Anna B. Quick, who through her steadfastness kept the small congregation afloat during long periods without a pastor a century ago. Every Sunday she would come to the rundown church building, unlock the doors, turn on the lights, and keep vigil in the sanctuary just in case someone showed up. She filed the annual paperwork to keep the church a legal

entity. Over time, conditions changed, and the church began to thrive again.

At least, that's how the story was told. When a recent pastor dug into the details, he discovered that things changed only after Quick and a few others started giving boldly and sacrificially of their time and money to hire a pastor, tear down the old building, and raise money for a new facility and new ministries. Quick and others denied themselves, took up their cross, and followed where it led—not to some remote mission field, but to a profound offering of self in the name of following Jesus.

"Now is no time for an academic solidarity with the world," writes Richard Rohr. "Real solidarity needs to be felt and suffered. That's the real meaning of the word 'suffer'—to allow someone else's pain to influence us in a real way. We need to move beyond our own personal feelings and take in the whole." Self-improvement has its place, but Jesus promises us something much deeper, if we're willing to give ourselves to it.