In the midst of navigating the latest masking protocols and adjusting some start dates to account for areas recently flooded, the school year has started! Kids and parents have made their runs to buy notebooks, pens, and backpacks. Teachers have spruced up bulletin boards and survived the latest in-service days before the arrival of students.

If I had any doubts left that it was time for me to leave my role as a school social worker it was during my final September in-service. For not the first, but the second, year in a row, we had a “team building” activity that included a scavenger hunt. I wouldn’t have minded if we were challenged to find secretly hidden ways to motivate kids to read or inspire families to be invested in partnering with the school to help the kids.

Either of those would have been worthwhile, but, no, those were not on the list. For a second year (a year after I questioned the wisdom and ever so politely suggested the administration revisit the search, what was on the scavenger hunt list was something, and I quote, “SHAPED RED.”
Shaped red? Seriously? A typo once, ok; we all make mistakes. Two years in a row? I was told to lighten up. Co-worker friends who knew I was leaving (nurse Sighle calling seminary my Exit Strategy) realized I had a newfound confidence to challenge what made no sense. In a long list of indications, being told to find something “shaped red” was an epiphany, a revelation. Appropriating language from a school setting, it was what we might call a “Teachable Moment” confirming it was time to go.

A “Teachable Moment” is one in which we already have some information, some awareness, yet, we have not had that light bulb illuminate above our heads. We are primed and ready, needing only the precise circumstances to transport us from “There’s something going on here,” to, “AHA! Now I get it!”

Today’s Gospel passage from Mark is, in Scriptural terms, a Teachable Moment. In many ways it is a pivotal moment in the ministry of Jesus and in the portrayal of it by Mark. Up to this point, Jesus has been on the road, teaching and healing... doing amazing things. From this moment onward, he is heading toward Jerusalem, where he will encounter resistance, rejection, and the Cross.
The villages where he has been are not traditional Jewish strongholds. Rather, Jesus has been through areas which lean toward the Empire and readily embrace what we might call pagan traditions. *What happens in Caesarea Philippi stays in Caesarea Philippi, if you know what I mean.*

Notice where Jesus poses the question about the impression people have of him: on the way. Think about that if even for a moment. In the course of the travel. At no place in particular. On the way: where real life happens!

*After hearing what the locals think of Jesus, the incisive question comes: Who do you say that I am?*

The disciples, the class, the students, now must answer for themselves. Jesus knows this is a Teachable Moment.

Peter voices the quote unquote right answer: Messiah/ Christ / One Anointed for a Purpose / the Leader to Rescue us.

If we were there, on the way with Jesus, we may have thought the same thing. Here, now, 2000 years later, we might use the same titles. Who do you say Jesus is? What title or word? What does it mean? What does it mean to you...personally?
Before Peter can puff out his chest as the smartest kid in class, before the rest of them can brand him as the Teacher’s Pet, Jesus upends everything. Jesus makes this a Teachable Moment.

Jesus tells them: I will suffer, be rejected by all the experts, be executed, only to rise again.

We are told he said all of this quite openly. Plain talk, Blunt speech, brutally honest.

How could any of this possibly make sense? We have the benefit of 2000 years’ hindsight. Still, this teachable moment is for us, too. It is in what would seem humiliation and defeat that Jesus accomplishes glory and victory.

It is only by sacrifice and self-denial that any of us truly follows where Jesus leads and calls us to be.

You may recall when I think of the Psalms, I think of John Denver’s song Poems, Prayers, and Promises. Reflecting on this passage, I recall another of his songs, one that my uncle and aunt used to sing.
A love song meant for a couple, I hear the refrain from the perspective of Jesus in this Teachable Moment on the way.

*Follow me where I go, what I do, and who I know.*
*Make it part of you to be a part of me.*
*Follow me, up and down, all the way, and all around.*
*Take my hand and say you’ll follow me.*

This passage from Mark, essential to people first hearing it around year 70 as the Temple was falling, speaks vitally to us in our own context. When we allow ourselves to wrestle with it, it is not easy to digest. A Savior who suffers? Losing our lives? How are those already pushed around and pushed to the edge supposed to deny themselves?

Would anyone put this stuff on a banner seeking new church members? The Jesus of Mark speaks hard truths. On this weekend of painful remembrance, the Jesus of Mark provides us this powerful Teachable Moment.

Committing to what seems on the surface to be the opposite of what we expect, committing to service, advocacy, and persistence in the pursuit of justice is what it means to be in relationship with Jesus Christ. It is what it means to truly follow.
Often, we have sung the spiritual, *Lord I Want to be a Christian*. Its lyrics include:

*Lord, I want to be a Christian*

*Lord, I want to be more loving*

*Lord, I want to be more holy*

*Lord, I want to be like Jesus...*

*In my heart, in my heart;  
Lord, I want to be like Jesus  
In my heart.*

May all of us be inspired to answer to God and ourselves who we say that Jesus is. May the words of Jesus we encounter in Mark be a Teachable Moment to us all.