

COMFORT ZONE

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Mark 8:27-38

In 1969, Warren Burger was appointed chief justice of the United States Supreme Court. He was named to this position by President Richard Nixon. After Burger was confirmed, he was given a tour of the Supreme Court building, a building for which, as chief justice, he would be responsible.

On his tour, he noticed several things. He noted that the place was in desperate need of painting, and the lighting was dismal. He noted that his new office as Chief Justice was smaller than his office in the Court of Appeals. And then there was the courtroom itself. Burger objected that the chairs used by the justices didn't match. Each justice brought their own chair to the court. Some chairs were tall; some were short; some were higher than others. Burger ordered that the court purchase matching chairs.

The other thing that he noted about the courtroom—and this was huge—was the bench itself. The wooden bench where the nine justices sat was straight. The justices sat shoulder to shoulder in a line, looking out at the courtroom like the disciples in Leonardo de Vinci's Last Supper. From arguing a case himself before the court, Burger knew that sitting in this arrangement, the justices were unable to see one another, and they had difficulty hearing one another. This configuration led to a high number of interruptions during oral arguments.

So, in 1971, while the court was in recess, Burger ordered that the bench be disassembled and rebuilt into a new configuration. He wanted there to be a middle section that faced straight out and two side sections that angled forward in a very flat U-shape. Technically, the shape is a half-hexagon. The intent was that the justices could see and hear one another.¹

The change was not welcomed by every member of the court. Justice William O. Douglas called the change "as useless and unnecessary as a man's sixth Cadillac." Understandably, Justice Douglas objected to the new design because it altered how things had been—an arrangement he was used to. The new design challenged his comfort zone.

Chief Justice Burger's change was sound not just from his own personal experience arguing before the court, but also because it reflected the psychological understanding of how people communicate. In communications, there are important audio and visual connections that are made. Research has shown that "eye contact

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/07/16/the-supreme-courts-extreme-makeover-how-rearranging-the-furniture-increased-civility/>

can factor greater cooperation among individuals.” The Supreme Court, Burger knew, worked best when it worked together. The justices needed to see and hear one another. Research also shows that “when people cannot hear, decision-making and collegiality can suffer.”

Our reading today from the Gospel of Mark is one of the travel stories we encounter so frequently in our gospels. Jesus and his disciples are between places traveling to the edge of Jewish lands, and he uses the opportunity of the travel time to teach. In this instance, Jesus asks his disciples a simple question. He asks, *Who do people say that I am?* The disciples, walking along beside him, offer a range of responses. They say, *Some think you are John the Baptist. Some believe you to be Elijah returned from heaven. Some consider you to be a prophet.*

These answers are not surprising. They reflect the people’s attempt to place this miracle-performing rabbi into their existing religious framework. To view Jesus as a prophet keeps him well within their comfort zone. They are used to prophets.

Then Jesus asks the disciple another question. He asks who they consider him to be. Peter jumps up and proclaims, *You are the Messiah.* And we applaud Peter for seeing beyond the mundane response of the people. But still, messiah isn’t that much of a stretch. To view Jesus as messiah is well within Peter’s own comfort zone. At the time, the people of Israel were hoping for a messiah, but they expected a messiah within the confines of Jewish tradition. They were hoping for an anointed king from the house of David who would free Israel from their Roman oppressors. They wanted a king who would restore Israel to glory and make her people righteous. That is the messiah they had in mind—a messiah well within their comfort zone.

The origins of the term comfort zone are not known. The leading theory is that it describes the temperature range—about 67 to 78 degrees, depending on the season—at which people were neither too hot nor too cold. But normally, when we talk about comfort zone, we are talking about a psychological comfort zone where we can function without stress. As one author defines it, “a behavioral state within which a person operates in an anxiety-neutral position.” A comfort zone is a good place.

In the second part of our reading, Jesus informs his disciples that he is going to suffer. He is going to be rejected by the religious authorities and he will be killed. But, after three days, he will rise again. Jesus says this to them quite clearly. There is no hidden subtext to his words. But Peter finds that this prognostication challenges the bounds of his own comfort zone. Yes, Peter is happy to call Jesus messiah. But this messiah is supposed to defeat the Romans; he is not supposed to be killed by his own people. Peter pulls Jesus aside and demands that he not speak in front of the guys like that. It’s bad for moral. Who wants to join up with a martyr? They are here for the glory, not the suffering.

Upon hearing this, Jesus whips around and says to Peter, *Get behind me Satan. You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.* And he is correct. Peter's comfort zone does not allow for Jesus to suffer, much less die. Peter expects Jesus to lead them into Jerusalem with the army of Israel poised to slay the Romans just as David defeated Goliath a thousand years earlier—the scrappy underdog taking on an empire.

The concept of a comfort zone is a popular subject in books about business and leadership. The authors of these books stress that if their readers wish to succeed, then they must move beyond their personal comfort zones. Comfort zones are great, but they can lead to us living in a rut, doing the same thing over and over because it doesn't cause us any stress or discomfort. It becomes the path of least resistance. However, if we want to improve or expand, then we may need to step outside our comfort zone.

In 1908, two psychologists² conducted what has become a famous experiment. Using mice, they found that stimulation improved the animals' performance, but only up to a certain level. There is a point which they defined as "optimal anxiety." Beyond this point the mice were under too much stress and their performance deteriorated. As pertains to humans, another writer explains, "We [humans] need a place of productive discomfort. If you're too comfortable, you're not productive. And if you're too uncomfortable, you're not productive. Like Goldilocks, we can't be too hot or too cold."³

In the final section of our reading, Jesus challenges his listeners to move beyond their own comfort zones. He says to the crowd that had assembled to hear him, *If you want to become my followers, then you need to deny yourself and take up your cross and go where I go.* These are radical words that exist beyond any reasonable person's comfort zone. To take up a cross referenced the vile form of degrading and torturous execution employed by the Romans. And no one should want that. Jesus tells the people that to save their life they must lose their life. And, if they lose their life for Jesus and for the gospel, then they will save it.

I don't believe that Jesus is necessarily telling his listeners to go out and become martyrs. But he is telling them to leave the boundaries of their comfort zones. To do so, they must be willing to accept the consequences of being a Christ-follower. They must place the priorities of the gospel ahead of their own comfort and security. If being a Christ-follower means giving away your money, so be it. If being a Christ-follower means giving up of your time, your energy, your leisure, so be it. To be a Christ-follower is to dedicate our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others

² Robert M. Yerkes and John D. Dodson

³ Daniel H. Pink, "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us" (Riverhead, 2009).

might experience God's love which is made known in Jesus Christ. To lose our life for Christ is to save it.

There is one more aspect to comfort zones that is useful to us—they can change size. Comfort zones can grow. It's like adding an addition to your house. Comfort zones grow as we assimilate new experiences into our lives.

Remember how Justice Burger changed the shape of the Supreme Court bench. Two researchers conducted a study of twenty years of oral argument in the Supreme Court—ten years before the bench change in 1971 and ten years after. Using court transcripts and audio recordings, they tabulated every utterance by every justice and calculated the number of interruptions. The result: after 1971, interruptions between justices fell by more than half. Burger's experiment was a success. Today, fifty years later, I doubt that any justice would want to return to the Last Supper style of seating. Their comfort zone has expanded.

As Christ-followers, we should also strive to expand our own comfort zones. The gospel message provides us with the charge to reach beyond ourselves. Take, for example, our congregation's involvement with Compassionate Hands. In the beginning, we were anxious about housing the homeless. But we did it. And today, we've opened our facilities and we regularly feed folk at Compassionate Hands—actions beyond our comfort zone but which now seem normal.

As Christ-followers, we can't remain complacent. We are called to expand our world so that more may know God's love in Jesus Christ.