



“Who Do You Say He Is?”

Scripture – Mark 8:27-36

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, February 25, 2024

Raise your hand if you are fond of the barking, rebuking Jesus? Where is the kind and compassionate Jesus? And don't you feel at least a tinge of sympathy for Peter after the tongue-lashing Jesus dished out?

It is tempting to paint a portrait of Jesus as a wise and compassionate teacher who constantly oozed empathy for every needy individual he encountered. He was unquestionably wise – his teachings have stood the test of time and he is credited with more parables than anyone in history. He was also undeniably compassionate. Much of his ministry focused on healing people who suffered, and expecting just treatment for everyone.

Our painting of Jesus would likely portray a kind-hearted leader who was always encouraging others and inspiring people to stand taller and become a better version of themselves.

But, writer Ryan Lokkesmoe, suggests “we have airbrushed Jesus into a ‘socially palatable’ image that ‘smooths out his rough edges.’ [A colleague adds that] This image of Jesus is much easier to get along with and to present to the general populous, because he is pleasing. He fits in better [and] he doesn't ask too much of us or demand too many sacrifices...What's wrong with focusing on the good aspects of Jesus and simply ignoring the parts that drive us crazy?”¹

The problem is that when we skew our portrait of Jesus toward sweetness, he becomes more palatable, but less authentic. And perhaps more important, when we curtail his demands, we minimize *our* commitment.

Today's passage is burdensome, yet unavoidable. Make no mistake; there are terrific benefits to committing your life to the one who was constantly filled with God's Spirit. It opens up a world of possibilities that adds passion and purpose to your life. But do not be deceived. There are also considerable challenges. Jesus unapologetically declares that he has ridiculously high expectations.

Jesus is conversing with his disciples and at some point he brings the casual chatter to a close with a bottom line question. Do they understand who he is and what they've gotten themselves into?

They respond by rattling off what others are saying about him. “Some have confused you with that fiery cousin of yours, John the Baptist. Others equate you with the great prophets of the past; the name Elijah comes up constantly.” The disciples fall silent as they wonder how their responses are sitting with him. Jesus breaks the silence. “But I want to know what you think. Who do you say that I am?”

Peter – never shy about sharing what’s on his mind – replies with a well-honed Christological formula, “You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of being; Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” And Jesus said, “What?”

Peter does not really say that. It takes the church centuries to carve out such lofty language. Rather, Peter blurts out a succinct reply: “You are the Messiah!”

All eyes quickly turn to Jesus to gauge his response. Is Peter right? Jesus nods his approval. Then, in one of the defining moments of the gospel, Jesus spells out what it means for him to be the Messiah. His words are like fingernails scraping a chalk board. He annihilates their notions of a triumphant Messiah who will seize the reins of power and establish God’s kingdom on earth. He says people will not honor him, they will revile him; people will not embrace him, they will fear him; people will not follow him, they will kill him.

His words are traumatizing and Peter cannot bear them. Peter’s notion of the Messiah is so strikingly different that he is outraged and lashes out at Jesus. The passage says Peter rebukes Jesus, and the Greek word used to describe his reprimand is a verb that describes a rebuke of unclean spirits. The implication is that Peter tells Jesus that he is delusional and perhaps even possessed by a demon.²

In a blistering exchange, Jesus castigates Peter, calling him “Satan” and saying, “Get out of my way!” Jesus rips into Peter in front of the others, because he knows that Peter is airing what all of them think. Jesus says, “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Jesus knew that remaining faithful to God did not guarantee a trouble-free life. Rather, it meant he must endure ongoing conflict with those in power.

I do not think Jesus believed God had concocted a scheme for people to murder him; God wanted people to follow him. But Jesus knew that his collision course with the ruling elite would undoubtedly provoke them to use every weapon in their arsenal to silence him and Jesus wanted anyone who threw their lot in with him to know that if they were imagining smooth sailing, it’s best to jump ship now, because sticking with him would engulf them in dangerous waters.

Jesus was saying, “If you follow me, your family might disown you. Friends will think you’ve lost your mind, opponents will abuse you, and enemies will toss you in jail and worse. If you follow me, you’ll have to lug your own cross because self-sacrifice, not self-indulgence, is the path to an abundant life.”

And as risky as it sounded, some of them said, “Where do I sign up?” They walked away from the family business, ignored the ire of their friends, tossed aside their comfortable routines, and risked it all to follow him.

Are you gutsy enough to risk following where Jesus leads?

In our day, many think that spirituality signifies time alone in nature reflecting on a passage of Scripture and praying. That's a mere fraction of a spiritual life. Jesus would occasionally withdraw from people and spend time alone with God, but after those private moments, he always marched back into a hurting world to give himself away for others. That's our model.

People say they are spiritual, but not religious because they convince themselves that it's unnecessary to demonstrate their commitment to Christ by actually joining the church, serving in some ministry, and giving financially to the church. Today's passage exposes such anemic faith as an imposter. Jesus does not say, "I hope that among all of your commitments, you'll be able to carve out a little time for me, too." He is blunt and to the point. He says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "A person who won't die for something is not fit to live."

Many of the first responders to the 9/11 terrorist attacks understood what he meant. They were able to dash into those burning towers because they were not focused on themselves. Their eyes were on the needs at their doorstep and they responded as Christ would.

There have been countless others who were not courageous first responders, but people more like us, who took these words to heart and discovered their truth. People who did without so that their children could go to college; people who bought a smaller home so that they could give generously to the church; people who sacrificed their golf game to mentor a child; people who gave up a vacation to go on a mission trip, people who advocated for justice instead of spending all of their time with intellectual pursuits or pondering philosophical questions. The call to self-sacrifice has helped many people overcome the self-absorption that leads to a small life and allowed them to experience the deep joy of a full life.

When Jesus calls for us to deny ourselves, and when he says that those who lose their life for his sake will find it, he's talking about priorities. He's warning us about the things that get us sidetracked so that we can give proper attention to the things that are genuinely important in life.

We enrich our lives when we sacrifice for others. We overcome our insecurities when we focus on someone else's pain. And we spawn a grateful heart when we reach out our hand.

This is precisely why our church family feeds people who are hungry, houses people who are rebuilding their lives, fills backpacks with school supplies for low income children, gives Christmas boxes, provides Stephen Ministers' for people who mourn, speaks out against oppression and racism and homophobia and Islamophobia, supports mission efforts in Guatemala and Congo, supports peacemaking and justice efforts in Israel/Palestine, seeks to preserve God's creation for future generations, financially supports homeless ministries, and more and more.

If you make a courageous commitment to following Christ, you may not discover an easy life. But you will find a life with depth and meaning, a life of love and satisfaction, a life of joy and hope, and the deep abiding peace in your soul that comes when your life is in harmony with our Creator.

NOTES

1. Amy Valdez Barker, "This is Really Jesus!" *Journal for Preachers: Lent 2024*, p. 34.
2. Paul J. Achtemeier, "Exegesis," in *Lectionary Homiletics*, September, 19

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the cosmos, who exists in all things and in whom all things dwell, we pause to ponder Jesus, your Anointed One, the Messiah. Who do we say he is? Who do we say he is not so much with our words, but with our lives?

Is Christ truly our guiding star?

How well do we share our bread with those who are hungry?

Do we take the initiative to extend true hospitality to the stranger?

Do we muster the courage to resist lies and stand for the truth?

Do we set aside time to visit those who are ill and alone?

Do we demonstrate our solidarity with those who are oppressed so that they may be set free?

Are we vulnerable with those who suffer so that we may carry part of their burden?

Sustainer of our lives, through your Chosen One, you laid at our feet an intimidating challenge – to deny ourselves, to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. Help us to understand that you do not command us to question our worth or suppress our potential; rather, you call on us to reach beyond our self-centered desires that push you to the periphery and quash healthy ties with others. Help us to know that it is only because of your true love for us that you challenge us.

Like a parent who will not allow us to settle for our small selves, you confront us with our petty grievances and envy of others, our short temper and harsh judgments, our self pity and timidity. Help us to know that you confront us not to condemn us, but to plead with us to become our better selves where compassion and courage and generosity thrive. Help us to walk the path Jesus walked so that love will saturate our heart, joy will infuse our spirit, beauty will fashion our character, hope will spark our vision, and peace will permeate our soul.

May each of us hear the call of Christ to follow him, and may we answer him with our very best. And now we pray with sincerity, the prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray, saying, **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**