



Sermon

Mark 8:27-38
September 13, 2009
15th Sunday After Pentecost / Homecoming Sunday
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Who Is Jesus?

.... and on the way [Jesus] asked them: "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist" and others, "Elijah," and still others one of the prophets. Jesus asked them: "But who do you say that I am?" – Mark 8:27-28

Do you welcome a kid back to school with a test? A pop quiz? The midterm? The final? On the first day? When you go back to work or class after vacation, don't you like to EASE into the routine?

Do you welcome back a congregation from summer recess with one of the scripture's toughest, trickiest questions?

I guess so, because today the gospel asks "who is Jesus?" I can't think of a question more central to the heart of belief, trust and Christian faith.

Who is Jesus?

All someone has to do is ask about Jesus, who he was way back when or who he is to people nowadays and there will be no shortage of opinions. Time, Newsweek, and US News and World Report do Jesus covers at least twice a year, in the same pattern as some church attendees – Christmas and Easter. Mel Gibson marketed a less gory, toned-down, viewer friendly version of his Passion of the Christ last Lent. Much of the The Davinci Code phenomenon a few years ago was about getting at the "real" Jesus. The popular Left Behind series of novels envision Jesus' second advent at any moment, the returning Lord wielding apocalyptic thunder and fire.

Who is Jesus?

Buddhist Thich Nhat Hahn has written Living Buddha, Living Christ and Jesus and Buddha: Brothers Going Home exploring common ground in two different but surprisingly similar paths to the Divine. Some years ago, the Jesus Seminar began a quest to distinguish the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history. Our Wednesday study group used a curriculum called Saving Jesus about rescuing the good Lord from contemporary irrelevancy. I even found a web site whoisjesusreally.com Is Jesus "Legend, Lunatic, Liar, or Lord?" the site asks.

"Who is Jesus?" the gospel reading asks. "Who do YOU say?" Jesus asks.

Be careful. How you answer may kick up a fuss as contentious as the health care debate.

Oh, by the way, welcome back to church. Hope you had a nice vacation.

Why did Jesus ask the "what are people saying"/ "who do people say I am" question in the first place? After all the OTHER answers, Peter is the one who gets it right. "Messiah." "Christ." God's anointed one. But right answer and all, Peter is no teacher's pet. "Shut up," Jesus says. "Don't tell anyone." What's up with that?

C'mon, Fred. We're just back from vacation. Can't we do any easy Bible story? How about Jesus and the little children or the Good Shepherd snuggling sheep?

Maybe Jesus saw stars in Peter's eyes when he reprimanded him. "Messiah," Peter answered. "Christ." "Get behind me, Satan! You're not thinking like God," Jesus snaps back.

I wonder. Did Jesus see a BIG CHAIR with twelve chairs, six on either side, when he looked into Peter's eyes? Jesus stopped Peter because the "Christ" thing is not someone sitting next to the BIG CHAIR.

Sometimes I struggle with calling Jesus "Lord" even though you hear me using the title leading worship. On the one hand, I resonate with calling Jesus "Lord" out of respect and admiration. He's someone OF God, someone I look up to, someone who holds me accountable, someone who is a leader, ruler – someone who is all every other earthly ruler I can think of is NOT. At the same time, "Lord" holds the image of haughty hierarchy, not to mention men in bad wigs and funny looking, too-frilly-for-a-guy-to-wear fancy clothes.

Jesus shakes his head at this. "Then he began to teach them," the text says. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and be killed." And take up a cross. Lose life to save it. This is who I am, Jesus says. I am the one who suffers.

For all the media blitz and brew-ha-ha about who Jesus is, we haven't come up with a catchy handle to for the suffering Jesus. Lord. Prophet. Teacher. Healer. Savior. Bread. Shepherd. We have those down pat. But sufferer?

It's not just plain "sufferer" either. Look at Jesus and see not just suffering for suffering sake. See one who suffers for and with others. We're not thinking about suffering as a badge of honor like "bearing a cross" as putting-up with a problem child, bad marriage, physical ailment or aging parents, as popular speech likes to name "the crosses we bear."

The cross Jesus bears means suffering for others. For who? For the twelve with the stars in their eyes, believing in the BIG CHAIR. For Judas who took the money and ran. For the others who ran away to when things got scary. For Peter who got amnesia outside of where they put Jesus in jail. Suffering? For who? For the women at the foot of the cross. For the soldiers playing craps for his clothes. For the children he bounced on his knees. For the lepers, street walkers, tax

collectors, and easy-to-look-past people. Suffering? For who? All of these then or now. For what? To reconcile them and all of us to the God who doesn't abandon us no matter what. The God who won't quit suffering until the blind see, the lame walk, the hungry are fed, the lost are found, the outsiders are inside and prisoners go free.

If any would become my followers, Jesus says, you'll be willing to suffer and serve for and with the likes of these until together we come to a deepening vision of who God is and what God wants for the world; who God is and what God wants for the world past the rote, said-without-thinking labels easily rolling off tongues, until God's love, mercy, justice and peace are made flesh and dwell among us.

Why did Jesus ask the "what are people saying"/ "who do people say I am" question in the first place? Because even if you're as sure as Peter thought he was, there's probably lots more to the answer than you first blurted out.

An interesting window to the heart of the "who is Jesus" question comes in a most unlikely comparison – Jesus and Kris Kringle. Not just any old Santa but Edmund Gwyn, the real Santa in *Miracle on 34th St*. Gwyn plays a nice, friendly, harmless, delusional old man claiming to be Kris Kringle. The film revolves around people who enter his delusion and question who he really is.

The conflict in the story centers in Kringle's relationship with a little girl (played by Natalie Wood). The little girl has been raised by a tightly-wound, embittered mother who believes the world is a rough place with no room for dreaming or imagination. Reality is all that matters. Sooner or later you'll realize that things are the way they ARE. That's the mother's credo. So, the little girl, a worldly six going on forty meets Kris Kringle, a nice old man but nothing more.

It becomes Kris' goal to make the little girl believe.

Throughout the film, evidence mounts that this old gent is more than a nut job. He transforms everyone he meets. Good hearted people fall in

love with him. The uptight and high powered executives at Macy's feel threatened and work to shame and defeat him. But all along the way Kris brings Christmas joy to people's lives. The little girl witnesses minor miracles and her stiff façade begins to crack.

At the critical point of declaring her faith, the little girl meets with disappointment – the home she and her mother hoped for doesn't work-out. She loses hope. In despair, the little girl returns to her belief that Kris Kringle is just a nice old man. But despite her lapse in faith, the home she and her mother hope for comes to be. Her faith is restored.

Jesus and his disciples traveled together for months and months. Eight plus chapters worth in Mark so far this year! Multitudes fed. Demons cast out. Crowds fed. Storms calmed. Dead raised. Convincing evidence. Jesus asks: "Who do you say I am?" Peter pipes up. "You are the Messiah." Right answer. But more than just saying it, Jesus explains to those around him that the road leads thru rejection, suffering and death before praise, strength and resurrection. Like the Miracle on 34th St., Peter believed Jesus was a wonderful man with incredible powers but he wasn't really Santa.

Belief in Messiah is much more than a character reference. It is a claim to accept the impossible as true, the unbelievable as ordinary, the incredible as real. Jesus isn't looking for profession of what might be true, but unconditional commitment to what is true, *really true*.

A clergy friend told me about raising money for a shelter and feeding project for city homeless. He was visiting a corporate executive way up in Liberty place where the view of the city like the day Jesus' was taken to the pinnacle the Temple. My friend made his pitch believing this corporation was good for a major gift. Instead, the executive gave a lecture on the difficulties of the present economy.

Attempting to soften the blow that the gift would be less than expected, the exec kept using the phrase "in the real world." "In the real world"

economies, power, politics, governments work a certain way. "In the real world" this and "in the real world" that. "In the real world," the man with the office and the BIG CHAIR and the great view said, "In the real world, here's how it works. "In the real world," yada, yada, yada, yada.

Reflecting on this, my friend told me with a wry smile said: "The man with the BIG CHAIR way up at the top of Liberty Place thinks he has the real world. He doesn't have a clue."

See, "the real world" is where the man who runs Grace Café,' where we work welcoming and feeding the homeless, was started and run by a man who was a homeless crack addict. The real world is the newly retired couple I know who bought the RV they always dreamed of so they see the country. Except their method for seeing the country is traveling from disaster to disaster doing relief work, rebuilding homes.

Jesus isn't looking for profession of what might be true, but unconditional commitment to what is true and real. The hungry not fed, homeless not finding a home, the swords yet to be beat into plowshares, the blind not seeing and the deaf not hearing, the people who can't afford health insurance are a result of lacking in *OUR* imaginations, not God's.

Jesus isn't looking for profession of what might be true, but unconditional commitment to what is true and real. He's more than a good teacher, more another holy option from a broad spiritual menu, not the nice guy who does nice things for people in need. He is God's love made flesh, God's mercy on earth, God's peace and justice dangling like a plumb line. He is the transformer of hearts and minds to God's reality stirring imaginations transform the world. He is the one who joins us together as his body right now, now, continuing God's holy work. He is the one who invites us to table again today to gather, feed and nurture us so we can make it so.

God, open our hearts, minds and imaginations to what it means to recognize and follow *this* Jesus.

■■■ Amen ■■■