

Proper 19B 2021 Sermon

September 12, 2021

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves -and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples. And Peter answers: "You are the Messiah." Then Jesus begins to teach his disciples that he must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed... And Peter grabs Jesus and begins to rebuke him, because Peter's understanding of the Messiah does not *permit* the Messiah to suffer, be rejected, and be killed. The Messiah, in the mind of Peter, and of most Jews in Jesus' day, was thought to be someone who would *conquer* in the manner of their ancestor King David, destroying their enemies and triumphing in battle over whatever political empire was subjugating the Jewish people at that time. The picture Peter has in his mind of the Messiah simply does not mesh with someone who is rejected, suffers, and is killed. In the words of one scholar: "Peter imposes his own understanding of the Messiah upon the person of Jesus, rather than letting the *reality* of Jesus... *correct* his understanding of the Messiah."¹ Peter imposes his own understanding of the Messiah upon the person of Jesus, rather than letting the *reality* of Jesus... *correct* his understanding of the Messiah. It is almost as if Peter were saying to Jesus, "No! You *cannot* be the person God sent you to be! You *must* be who *I want* you to be!"

And, my friends, if we are honest, is that not what *we* do, at times, with Jesus – create Jesus in our own image, and not let the reality of Jesus, of Christ, change that image for us? At times, Jesus, in our minds, just happens to think the same way as we do about vaccines, masks, gun control, gay marriage, climate change, whatever the issue of the day. As the saying goes, "We don't see things as **they**

are, we see things as **we** are.” We impose our own understanding and biases upon Jesus, rather than letting the reality of Jesus correct our preconceived – and sometimes strongly-held – notions. Sometimes we can be like Peter, and not see Jesus as *Jesus* is; but rather, as *we* are. Peter professes Jesus to be the Messiah, and then he tells Jesus that Jesus doesn’t know what the Messiah is really like.

And because Peter sees Jesus not as *Jesus* is, but as *Peter* is, Peter can feel totally *justified* in rebuking Jesus when Jesus states that he must suffer at the hands of the religious authorities and be killed. *And*, this is why, later, when events begin to unfold the way Jesus had predicted, and Jesus is arrested, Peter cannot accept it. According to John’s Gospel, when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter responds with violence, drawing a sword and cutting off the ear of the high priest’s slave. (John 18:10) He *thinks* he is being a loyal follower of the Messiah; but he does something that Jesus would **never** do: he draws a sword and cuts off someone’s ear!

One scholar writes, “When Peter rejects Jesus’ teaching that the Messiah must be crucified, Peter is beginning to fashion a lie about God. Surely, Peter is suggesting, there *must* be an easier way”² than for Jesus to have to suffer and be killed! And this lie that Peter *begins* to create in today’s Gospel passage only grows after Jesus is arrested.

You remember the story: While Jesus is being questioned in the home of the high priest the night before he will be crucified, Peter is outside in the courtyard. He is accused three times of being a follower of Jesus. And three times Peter lies, saying he isn’t a follower; he doesn’t even know Jesus! (Mark 14:66-72)

Peter gets the *words* right — “You are the Messiah!” – but his *interpretation* of what those words mean is *wrong*. That is why Jesus “sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him” – because they would only pass along their own profound misunderstanding.

Peter professes Jesus to be the Messiah, but it’s all “head knowledge.” Jesus may be “the” Messiah; but he is not yet Peter’s *own* Messiah. “You are the Messiah” is a concept in Peter’s head; not yet a guiding and transforming reality in Peter’s life.

And we, too, my friends, can get stuck at the point of getting the words right: we can say the Creeds, the Lord’s Prayer, the liturgy as it is written in our Prayer Book. But do these words and prayers and receiving of the sacrament make *any* difference in our lives? Do we come to worship wanting to truly listen and be receptive to what Christ has to say to us, even if it challenges our own strongly held beliefs about society, the world, and God? Do we even *want* to be changed, to have our minds transformed into the mind of Christ, our hearts into the heart of Christ, our works into Christ’s work?

When I was in high school and college, I studied hard so that I would know the right answers on exams. What I dreaded were essay questions – when I was asked not to give an answer about facts out there in the physical world, but about truths discerned from within: what is right and true and good and loving in human interactions and relationships. When I saw an essay question, I would panic, thinking to myself, “But the answers aren’t within me – they’re out there!” Objective facts, for me, were the only certainties.

One pastor notes, “It would be so much easier if Jesus asked, ‘Who am I?’ Then we could repeat the answers we have heard all our lives— [you are] the second person of the Trinity, God incarnate, the Messiah. But he asks us to name what we *ourselves* actually believe, so we cannot hide behind what we have been *told* are the right answers.”³ “We are not saved by **other** people’s beliefs,” writes another pastor. “We find wholeness and vocation in claiming our own theologies and understandings of truth. These must ultimately become personal and relational, even if they are grounded in tradition.”⁴

Our understanding of God and of truth must ultimately become personal and relational, even if they are grounded in tradition.

Peter had the right objective answer: Jesus was the Messiah. But Jesus was not yet *Peter’s* Messiah. That would only come later, after Peter had suffered the guilt of denying Jesus three times and abandoning Jesus in his time of greatest need; and after Peter had experienced the devastation of Jesus’ crucifixion, which put to death so many of his hopes, put to death a part of Peter. It is only after Peter experienced the resurrection that Jesus – or, more accurately, the risen Christ – became not just “the” Messiah, but *Peter’s* Messiah.

My friends, I truly believe that this is what we are about, here at Christ Church. We have not, for the most part, settled for simply the “right” answer to questions of faith. I believe that our new logo accurately depicts who we are. We are not a church that stays on the surface level of objective facts (as helpful as they may be); rather, we go deeper. Our logo shows a tree that not only has flourishing foliage above the ground; it has deep roots beneath the surface, going ever deeper, seeking Living Water. The two Formation classes which we started today are indicative: One course is called, not “Faith **Facts**,” but rather “the Faith-Seeking Journey.” Faith is not a collection of facts but a journey which never ends. The other course is not called “*Learning* the Prayer of St. Francis,” but rather “*Living* the Prayer of St. Francis.” Putting this profound prayer into practice in our lives. And Mike and Linda Smith, through the Centering Prayer group which they lead, draw us deeper into the spirit and being of Christ. And I have been told by people who are new to Christ Church that this spirit pervades our life together.

In our Gospel reading, after Peter has rebuked Jesus, Jesus turns around and rebukes Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not

on divine things but on human things.” We all still do that, from time to time: set our minds on human things – the divisiveness in our world; the tribalism; the selfishness; the condemning judgment of those different from ourselves; our lack of compassion. And yes, we can sometimes impose on Jesus our own understanding of him, invoking his name in support of some viewpoint that is totally antithetical to what Jesus taught and how he lived. But for the most part, I believe that it can be said that Christ Church seeks Christ, and not our image of him. And I am so grateful to be a part of this church family as we go deeper, ever deeper, in the life and service of the Living Christ.

AMEN

1 P. Mark Achtemeier, *Lectionary Homiletics*, vol. 8, #10, p.16

2 *The Christian Century*, September 6, 2003 issue, Mary Hinkle Shore

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2003-09/lesson-plans>

3 David Keck, *The Christian Century*, “Living by the Word,” August 17, 2021,

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/september-12-ordinary-24b-mark-827-38>

4 Bruce G. Epperly, *The Christian Century*, August 14, 2018

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/september-16-ordinary-24b-mark-827-38>