

Learning from Jesus

Psalm 19, Mark 8:27-38

Center Church

September 16, 2018

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By the time we get to chapter 8 in Mark's gospel, Jesus and many of his companions have been traveling together for a couple of years. In that time, these things have happened:

- Jesus healed a man with an "unclean spirit," possibly mental illness
- In fact, he healed dozens of people with illness or injuries, physical or mental. Lepers, the lame, epileptics, a woman with a flow of blood, and on and on.
- He has forgiven peoples' sins. And by doing so made the religious leaders angry with him, for they claimed no human had that power.
- He started to hang around with tax collectors and prostitutes and others that "nice people" usually avoided.
- He broke the rules of the sabbath. More than once.
- He gathered others and trained them to teach and heal
- He told many stories, called parables, to help people understand things like faith, forgiveness, love, generosity, God's kingdom.
- He calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee
- He sent a demon into a herd of pigs who promptly ran off a cliff.
- He raised a little girl who was presumed dead.
- He fed thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and two fish. Twice.
- He walked on water.
- He got into theological arguments with the religious leaders. More than once.
- He healed the child of a woman who was not a Jew.

He was a busy guy.

After all that, Jesus chats with the disciples one day and asks an intriguing question: “Who do people say that I am?”

I guess it was sort of the equivalent of Googling yourself, or posting something vague on Facebook or Snapchat and seeing how people respond. But Jesus did not have social media to tell him who people thought he was. No counting likes. Or dislikes!

Now some of you have been hearing stories of Jesus for years, and some more recently come to get to know Jesus. So, I’m wondering, having heard what you have heard, who do you say Jesus is? (leave time for conversation)

People in our tradition believe many different things about Jesus. In fact, the only faith statement the UCC calls people who want to be members to make is that they believe Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior. However, each person defines those terms. From our point of view, the important thing is not who you say Jesus is, but how what you believe about Jesus impacts your life. Or doesn’t.

Jesus’ disciples came back to him with theological statements. “You are a prophet, like one of the old, famous prophets.” “You are John the Baptist come back to life.” And then Peter says the big one: “You are the Messiah, the savior for which Israel has been waiting.”

At that point, Jesus shuts them down. I don’t think he does that because who he is is some big secret. He’s hardly held back on anything to this point, so it’s not likely he’s starting now.

No, he turns the conversation around from theoretical theological identities. Instead, he says “I am the one who is going to suffer because of what I have said and done, because it upsets the way the powerful want the world to work. I am the one coming to announce God’s kingdom, not a realm that looks anything like what the world looks like now. I am a God-filled problem for the world as it is.”

Then he says, "You need to be problems, too!" He turns the conversation from his identity to ours. Jesus is tricky and annoying like that.

The question then becomes, "Who do people say that we are?" Not what you look like or what job you do or who your family is. Not your connection to anyone living or dead. Jesus was never interested in that about himself or anyone else. He asked the original question to see if people were getting what it was he was up to. He knew that if they were getting it, he was in a ton of trouble. If people actually believed he was the Messiah, trouble would not follow, but most did not. They may have thought he was a prophet, but we can read in the Hebrew Bible what happened to many of the prophets at the hands of both the powerful and the powerless. They were jailed, physically attacked, stripped of their homes and possessions, exiled, threatened with death, in short, it wasn't a pretty or easy life.

Jesus says, "Well, if they think I'm a prophet and you want to follow me, get ready because it's going to be a bumpy ride." That is, if people see that we are of Jesus by what we say and do. It's not a great recruitment line for new church members, but, oh my, exactly what our society and the world need right now!

Who do people say that Jesus is? Jesus says he is a pain in the neck of those who are powerful and wealthy and comfortable.

Which begs the question: who do people say that we are?