

Title: And Your Expectations?

Text: Mark 8: 27 – 36

Date: September 16, 2018

This scripture lesson this morning lays the foundation for a rather interesting discussion for us. But rather than saying an “interesting” discussion, perhaps I should say an “important” discussion. And along with being an “important” discussion, I wonder if on some level it is a discussion that we tend to avoid.

At this point in the gospel story the disciples had been with Jesus for a while. They had seen him in various different public settings. They saw how he interacted with people, and how he answered questions. They witnessed miraculous encounters. They also had quiet times together around a fire at night. They also had time for unstructured, spontaneous conversation together while walking down long, dusty roads. After all that they had been through together, surely there is nothing out of place for Jesus to ask them, **“Who do people say that I am?”**

I have been here about a year now, and you would think that that would be long enough to get around to talking about this person of Jesus. What do y’all think about him? What’s the word on the streets?

Of all places, a church is the last place you would think of as requiring courage to talk about Jesus. Aren’t churches the place you go where “the right answer” is expected to be loudly and unequivocally proclaimed?

But Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church is not a “normal” church. We try to be extra sensitive towards those who have been scarred while at more dogmatic churches. We are not a church that dishes out doctrine with the hopes of then hearing unthinking regurgitation. It is true that we don’t force feed truth to you. Yet having said that, wouldn’t it be a little strange to avoid the conversation altogether? So I ask you, “Who do people say that Jesus is? What’s the word on the streets?”

Aside from not “dishing out doctrine,” there is another uniqueness to Shepherdstown Presbyterian. While we say we are rooted in the way of Jesus, we *also* say that we welcome the wisdom of all faith traditions. So what does that mean? I reflected on this with a small group recently, and asked, “Would it describe us equally well if Jesus’ name were *not* mentioned, and we simply said, ‘We welcome wisdom from all faith traditions.’?” There seemed to be concurrence that we were not prepared to go there. We could not avoid Jesus. This person of Jesus needed to be dealt with. So I ask again, “What do y’all think about him? What’s the word on the streets?”

When the disciples were asked this question they came up with an array of possible answers. I dare say that no one here would come up with an answer like John the Baptist; or Elijah; or one of the prophets. We could de-construct *why* these were considered plausible answers, but suffice it to say that they all came from a political and religious worldview foreign to us. Now it is conceivable that someone here might come up with the same answer as Peter and claim that Jesus was the Messiah. But to that answer I would press the point, and say “What do you mean by that? Really!” I mean no disrespect in posing this question, for in truth that is in essence what Jesus did. While we could argue that Peter should have at least received partial credit for coming up with “the right” answer (ding! ding! ding!), in truth Jesus and Peter had such different notions of what this meant that they were in entirely different orbits.

With any possible answer that the disciples came up with – with any possible answer that *you* might come up with – there are certain expectations that come with that answer. If one of the disciples believed that Jesus was actually Elijah returned from the dead, that might have been a reference to Malachi 4:5-6. Therefore the expectation would have been that this was the beginning of “the end times.” If Peter believed that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, then his expectation might have been that Jesus was about to lead a revolt that would drive out their Roman occupiers.

While I doubt that anyone here might have similar expectations, I think it is likely that what you believe about Jesus will come with its own set of expectations. . . and it is good to be honest about those expectations. If you believe that Jesus was an exemplary Jewish reformer, then perhaps you might have an expectation that you are now called to be a Christian reformer. If you believe that Jesus was a good teacher, then perhaps your expectation is that you should be a good student. If you believe that Jesus was the lamb of God who died to take away your sins, then perhaps your expectation is that you should continually be showing how thankful you are for this. If you believe that Jesus was a healer full of God’s presence, then perhaps you believe that Jesus should heal you, and those you bring to him. If you believe that Jesus was “the Lord of the harvest,” then your expectation might be that you should be a part of a band of evangelists. If you believe that Jesus was a nice man, then perhaps you are satisfied with expecting that your high calling is to be a nice person as well. What are your expectations?

Remember, though, that Peter responded to Jesus’ question by saying, **“You are the Messiah.”** (v. 29) It’s not hard to imagine that making that confession had to be one of the best moments in Peter’s life. For there’s something indescribably wonderful about recognizing and participating in a truth bigger than yourself, about naming truth in a way that somehow makes it more true in your own experience. It’s like saying “I love you” for the first time to a beloved, and in saying it realizing just how true it is, even truer than it was just a moment before. That’s what happens with Peter just outside of Caesarea Philippi, as with that confession his heart, brimming over with insight and faith, begins to sing.

Jesus’ response to his profession of faith was confusing enough, for Jesus **“sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.”** (v. 30) Then Jesus openly taught them that he **“must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.”** Peter then took him aside and began to rebuke him. Peter’s confusion must have given way to total heartbreak when Jesus then confronts him saying, **“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”** (v. 33) Who could endure such words from Jesus? Peter wanted a strong God, and who can blame him. Yet Jesus is a different kind of Messiah from what we expected . . . and he always will be. Henri Nouwen writes that **“Jesus was a revolutionary, who did not become an extremist, since he did not offer an ideology, but Himself.”**

The thought becomes even more troubling when we personalize it. I can’t help but wonder how any of us would feel, espousing our most sincere, and well-intentioned thoughts, to then hear Jesus say to us, **“Get behind me, Satan!”**

The Gospel of Mark does not provide many satisfying theological answers to the question of who Jesus is. Much of that theologizing will come many years later. Jesus recurring message at this point was simply **“follow me,”** and this doesn’t exactly go over well . . . with all this talk about suffering, rejection, and death. Nonetheless, perhaps Shepherdstown Presbyterian is onto something when the recurring theme here is more on doing things *“in the way, and the spirit of Jesus,”* and less on a robust theological explanation of the person of Jesus.

You know that quote from Jesus, **"My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."**? That is not found in the gospel of Mark. Mark is all about the harsh realities of following him. Jesus is looking for followers - for those who know what they are getting into. Who understand the path of self-denial. Is this what you were expecting?

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes, **"If Jesus were in charge of an average congregation I figure there would be about four people left there on Sunday mornings, and chances are those four would be fooling themselves. Jesus would greet newcomers by saying, 'Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life? It will take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Plenty of people have launched out on it without counting the cost, and as you can see they are not here anymore. The other thing is, if you succeed, if you really follow me, it will probably get you killed. Why don't you go home and think it over? I would hate for you to get in over your head.'"**

Daniel Berrigan, the American Jesuit priest, and anti-war activist, says **"How preferable it would be to meditate on the gospel rather than being summoned to it."** René Padilla, Ecuadorian theologian and missiologist, echoes that theme when he writes, **"What is the value of a Christianity in which Jesus is worshipped as Lord, but Christian discipleship - "the way of Jesus" - is regarded as largely irrelevant to life in the modern world?"**

Jesus said to his disciples, **"Who do people say that I am?"** Then comes the critical question, **"But who do you say that I am?"** How would you answer that? What are your expectations?

Jesus minces no words in our reading today when he says, **"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."** (vv. 34 – 35) Let me conclude with a poem written by Steve Garnaas-Holmes as he reflected on these verses.

Crucified One,
give me grace to enter the wound of the world,
to accompany those who suffer,
to willingly suffer for others' sake,
not for the purpose that I meet you there,
which gives me joy,
but that I meet them there—
not that they may be a means to my joy,
but that I be a means to theirs.
Help me trust that you are with me on the cross
not for my sake but for theirs.
Let your love in me overwhelm my fear
and transform my selfishness.
Give me true self-giving love,
which is the only joy.

Amen.

Mark 8: 27 – 36

²⁷Jesus 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?" ²⁸And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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."

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?