

Who is Jesus?
Mark 8:27-38
September 17, 2006

As some of you may be aware, I occasionally teach Biblical Studies for the Religion Department at Baldwin-Wallace College; and one of the courses that I sometimes teach is entitled “Jesus and the Gospels.” The syllabus for this course lists three objectives: 1) to investigate some of the latest scholarly research regarding the historical Jesus of Nazareth; 2) to compare and contrast both the writing and the Christologies presented in the canonic Gospels with special attention paid to the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John; and, 3) to understand the structure and use of the parable as the primary teaching tool of Jesus of Nazareth – all good scholarly endeavors. The syllabus goes on to state that no particular religious faith or belief will be assumed, espoused, or encouraged in this class. Having said that, I go on to introduce myself as a United Methodist Minister. I explain that, while in the interest of academic integrity we will remain open to and respectful of all faiths and beliefs, I find it impossible to “check my clergy credentials at the door” when I walk into the classroom. I live with one foot in the parish and one foot in the academy, and I find that hugely meaningful. I hope that my students will likewise, on some level, find personal meaning in the academic pursuit of Gospel literature. Having said all of that, I put this slide on the screen:

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?”

(Mark 8:27-29a)

An so, in that first session, I ask my class, “Who do you say Jesus is? I then ask them to take out a blank sheet of paper, and write a paragraph answering this very question. There is no right or wrong answer, and this will not be graded. This is simply the starting point. Today, right here at Church of the Saviour, I ask each of you the same question. . . Who do you say that Jesus is?

On the first day of “Jesus and the Gospels” class, the answers I get from students vary greatly. Some give the biblical answer – Jesus is the Messiah, or the Christ, or the Son of God. Some turn to the creed: “Jesus is the only begotten son of God, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate. . .” If you’ve been through confirmation class you probably know the words. Some students give what might be called a Jewish answer – Jesus was a very good man that walked the earth 2000 years ago. And, some give an answer from faith – Jesus is my personal Lord and Saviour. While I never directly challenge any of these statements, over the course of the semester, I call on my students to be more definitive. As we study the academic writings, I also ask questions like, “So what does it mean to say Jesus is the Messiah, or the Son of God? What does it really mean to you if you say that Jesus is your personal Lord and Saviour? What difference does this all make in your life? And so, I ask each of you again today, “Who do you say Jesus is? How do you personally define your relationship with Jesus Christ?”

When Jesus asked his disciples that very question, Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Now why in the world

would he do that? Repeatedly throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone about him, and this “Messianic Secret” as it’s called is one of the great mysteries of Biblical literature. Scholars offer various solutions to the Messianic Secret. Some suggest that Jesus did not want the word to get around, or he would never be able to move among the people in peace. Some suggest it was a “marketing technique” on the part of Jesus. If you want word to get around, tell a secret, start a rumor. Still others suggest that this might a literary device introduced by the gospel writer to create suspense and intrigue. But some very practical scholars suggest that Jesus ordered his disciples to remain silent about his identity, because they really did not understand who Jesus was. Oh yes, Peter confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, but what does that mean? Indeed, just a few verses later, Peter would rebuke Jesus for predicting his passion, death and resurrection; and Jesus would tell Peter that his mind was not on divine things but on human things. In chapter nine, Jesus would again predict his death and resurrection, and the disciples would argue as to which of them was the greatest. And finally, in chapter ten Jesus would, for a third time foretell his death and resurrection, and James and John would ask for the place on his right and on his left. Repeatedly throughout the Gospel, Mark tells us that the hearts of the disciples were hardened. They had eyes but did not see; they had ears but did not hear. Peter would confess that Jesus is the Messiah; but, when the going got tough, that same Peter would deny Jesus not once but three times. Is it any wonder that Jesus would not want these men proclaiming him as Messiah. They truly did not know of what they spoke. Despite their ability to stay “the right words,” they truly did not understand who Jesus is. So again I ask, what about you? Who do you say that Jesus is? How do you define your personal relationship with the risen Christ?

My friends, in the course of my academic pursuits, I have studied Judaism in depth; and I have dabbled a bit in the study of various Islamic traditions; but I am a Christian because of the role that Christ plays in my life. Throughout history, theologians have argued over whether God is transcendent or immanent. Is God “out there” someplace – the creator of the universe, but separate from the universe controlling creation from afar; or is God within the natural order, present throughout the creation. And I say, “Yes!” I say, “Both!” and it drives theologians nuts. Theologians tell me, “You can’t have it both ways. God is either separate from creation or God is part of creation. It’s an either/or relationship, not a both/and.” And I say, the Holy Trinity allows me to make it a both/and. My God is so great that God created all that is, and ever was, and ever will be; and, at the same time, my God is so great that God is centered in that creation. Not only that, but my God wanted so much to be close to his creation that God actually took on human form and dwelled among us. God literally walked beside us, to lead us, to teach us, and ultimately to die the most horrific of human deaths, so that we might know the love that God has for each of us. That’s who I say that Jesus is.

Jesus is the embodiment of the immanent nature of the all encompassing God. Jesus is that spirit of God that gives me a push of encouragement, of motivation, when I’m not quite sure that I want to move ahead. Jesus is the friend that stands beside me, whose shoulder I can lean on when I need strength to continue standing, and the one whose shoulder I can cry on when emotions swell up within me. Jesus is my teacher, my mentor who will lead me in the path of righteousness, the one who will say this is the way, now walk in this path by faith. Jesus is the protector whom I can trust to look over me, to guard me against all evil. But most importantly, Jesus is the source of the love that dwells within me. The love that I experience day in and day

out, and the love that I pray shines not only in me, but through me to all whom I meet. That's who I say that Jesus is; but this isn't about me. It's about you, and so I ask, "Do you know Jesus? Who do you say that he is?"

Prior to the resurrection, Peter did not know Jesus. Peter told Jesus, "You are the Messiah," but Peter's image of the Messiah would have been a Jewish messianic image. Peter hoped for a second King David who would conquer the Roman forces by military might, who would again ascend to the throne in Jerusalem to return Israel to a former state of earthly glory. Jesus was not about military might. Jesus was not about establishing an earthly kingdom. Jesus did not seek royal domination over the planet. Remember, John's Gospel tells us that Peter drew a sword in the garden in attempt to prevent the arrest of Jesus. Peter did not know Jesus, at least not until after the resurrection. But Jesus has risen. Jesus lives. Do you know Jesus? Who do you say that he is?

At the end of a semester of study, I again put this slide on the screen; and I again ask my students to answer the question: "Who do you say that he is?" The first thing that is noteworthy is that their answers are usually a good deal longer than they were at the beginning of the semester. They have come to realize that this is not a simple question with a simple answer. They go on to talk about Jesus as the embodiment of compassion and love and joy and peace. They talk about a Jesus who, in the midst of a highly class oriented sexist society would treat women as equals and would dine with outcasts. Yes, they talk a lot about Jesus of Nazareth who walked this earth for a mere thirty-three years. But sometimes they also talk about the resurrected Christ who is one with God, and who is a force of love and peace in their lives. And they talk about how they still struggle to understand this; and I assure them that growth comes from the struggling. I tell them to keep searching, but don't let the searching get in the way of the love and peace that the risen Christ brings into their lives.

So, do you know Jesus? Who is he? What's your personal relationship with him? My friends, these are not simple questions with simple answers; but it's time to start searching. Last weekend, I had the privilege along with seven other adults to be on retreat with thirty-three middle school youth from this church; and, yes, I do consider it a privilege to be able to spend time with our youth. The stated purpose of that retreat was to encourage a closer relationship with Christ; and so, we discussed and practiced spiritual disciplines. We practiced scripture reading, and prayer, and worship, and solitude – all with the stated purpose of seeking and knowing God. Now, I'm not going to tell you that any of us came home from that retreat with the definitive answer of who Jesus is? But last weekend, some of our youth started searching, and others of us continued our search.

So what about you? Who do you say that Jesus is? It's time to start searching. I call on you today to make a personal commitment to establish a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. Practice the same spiritual disciplines that we practiced last weekend. I feel that I'm "preaching to the choir" when I speak of the importance of worship. You folks are here today, in worship; but I cannot overemphasize the importance of coming together as a body of Christian believers to worship, to praise and glorify God. I cannot overemphasize the strength that comes from community; but spending a couple hours a week in church does not, by itself establish a relationship with Christ. So we look to other disciplines, starting with scripture. Read your Bible daily. Join a Bible Study. Take a DISCIPLE class. Did you know that John Wesley called Bible study: "Searching the Scriptures." Thirdly, make prayer a part of your life. Pray

before every meal, either silently or aloud, pray at bed time, pray at rising in the morning, pray - talk to God. And take part in other spiritual activities that can enhance your prayer life. Do an Emmaus Walk. Join Companions in Christ. Walk a labyrinth. Come to a Taizé service. Find what works for you, but pray. Finally, spend time alone with God, time not to talk, but to listen to God, time for reflection. Will you take the time? Will you practice the spiritual disciplines on a regular basis? Will you make a commitment to seek an ever closer relationship with the risen Christ? Will you start searching?

Who do you say that Jesus is? I doubt any of us will ever be able to answer that question to our total satisfaction; but as we search, we grow ever closer to the risen Christ with all the love and peace and joy that relationship offers. It's time to start searching, and may the peace of Christ that passes all understanding be with each of you now and forever more. Amen.

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