

Pentecost 17B (9/16/2018)

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 116:1-9

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus' identity and purpose are continually reinterpreted, thus he is enduringly relevant. The danger lies in making Jesus in our own image. But, the Messiah beckons us to die to prevailing ideologies – especially the ideologies we project onto him – that we might be free to pick up a different kind of burden for his sake and for the sake of the world he loves.

“Who do you say that I am?”

This is a question for each of us. Listening to our Gospel from Mark today, we have the luxury of sitting back as the first disciples venture an answer to Jesus' question, but ultimately we have to answer it, too.

“Who do you say that I am?”

Of course, we can learn something from the story. According to the disciples, some of the people have confused Jesus with John the Baptist; others believe that he is Elijah returned to Earth from heaven; still others think he's a prophet like the prophets of old. But Jesus is not satisfied with mixed opinions, no matter how closely they approximate the truth; he is not content with rumors. So, he prods his closest followers to pinpoint his identity: “But who do *you* say that I am?” “You are the Messiah,” Peter replies confidently. And, as quickly as the truth emerges, Jesus obscures it again: “And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.”

It appears that Peter has answered correctly. The word “Messiah,” or “Anointed One,” gets at the truth of Jesus' identity and purpose, but I wonder if he might have accepted any number of other responses: “You are the Teacher”; “You are the Lord”; “You are the Son of God.” And, these are only a few of the dizzying array of descriptors we reserve for Jesus. Think of how fluidly and diversely we speak about him:

“O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.”¹

“Come, Christians, follow where our captain trod, our king victorious, Christ, the Son of God.”²

“Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow, give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.”³

“My Jesus, my Savior, Lord, there is none like you. All of my days I want to praise the wonders of your mighty love. My comfort, my shelter, tower of refuge and strength; let ev’ry breath, all that I am never cease to worship you.”⁴

“Jesus, friend of sinners, the one who’s writing in the sand, made the righteous turn away and the stones fall from their hands. Help us to remember we are all the least of these. Let the memory of your mercy bring your people to their knees.”⁵

“You satisfy the hungry heart with gift of finest wheat. Come give to us, O saving Lord, the bread of life to eat.”⁶

“Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey; I’ll tell everybody about you wherever I go: you alone are our life and our peace and our love. Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey.”⁷

Emmanuel – God-with-us, Victorious King, Healer, Guiding Light, Savior, Comforter, Shelter, Refuge, Friend of sinners, Bread of Life, Our Song, our Life, our Peace, our Love – and all that from just seven songs.

¹ “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #257.

² George W. Kitchin, “Lift High the Cross,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #660.

³ Marty Haugen, “Healer of our Every Ill,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #612.

⁴ Darlene Zschech, “Shout to the Lord,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #821.

⁵ Mark Hall and Matthew West, “Jesus, Friend of Sinners.”

⁶ Omer Westendorf, “You Satisfy the Hungry Heart,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #484.

⁷ Les Petites Soeurs de Jésus and L’Arche Community, “Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #808.

“Who do you say that I am?” **Jesus’ question has inspired a seemingly endless stream of answers that vary from disciple to disciple, from tradition to tradition, from era to era. And, each answer speaks to the particular context from which it emerges.** French Lutheran theologian Albert Schweitzer gives a compelling reason for Jesus’ lasting appeal: “Each successive epoch found its own thoughts in Jesus, which was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live.”⁸ In other words, Jesus’ significance shifts in accordance with each culture that discovers him. Consider the following selection of portraits from 2,000 years of Christian history: Jesus has been the consummate Rabbi and Prophet, the Light of the Gentiles, the King of kings, the Mind of God, the Bridegroom of the soul, the Prince of peace, the Teacher of common sense, and the revolutionary Liberator.⁹ **From century to century, he has become all things to all people; Jesus’ identity and purpose are continually reinterpreted, thus he is enduringly relevant.**

The danger lies in making Jesus in our own image. Peter makes this very mistake when he misjudges the meaning of his own confession. “You are the Messiah,” he declares, yet he cannot accept that the Messiah should suffer persecution and death at the hands of the very empire from which he is supposed to deliver the people of Israel. To borrow the words of one interpreter, Peter has “the right title but the wrong understanding of what the title means for Jesus.”¹⁰

Jesus’ stern rebuke reveals that Peter’s misunderstanding is no small matter. **Peter has projected his own expectations onto the Messiah, so he has missed the true meaning of Jesus’ lordship. Peter has “set his mind” on worldly definitions of power and influence, failing to grasp that heaven gives priority to sacrificial love.**

⁸ Cited by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, 2.

⁹ Pelikan.

¹⁰ Harry B. Adams, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 70.

Do we make Jesus in our own image? **If he upholds our every religious preference, if he simply rubber stamps our political, economic, and social priorities, if he readily comes to our defense in the face of differing views, then we can be sure that the Jesus we claim is not the real one. If he never confronts us, if he never urges us beyond the limits of our categories, then we are likely setting our minds on worldly things, and disregarding the divine.**

How can we know that we've seen Jesus through the lens of truth, and not simply conflated our own agenda with his? As counterintuitive as it may seem, our primary means of perceiving Jesus is the means of his demise, the cross: "If any want to become my followers," he calls, "let them... take up their cross and follow me." **The Messiah, the Lord, the Son of God makes himself known not in power and glory, but in vulnerability and sacrifice. How else can the Creator stand in solidarity with suffering creatures? How else can God's Anointed extend his abiding love to us, the very ones who reject him?**

Dear church, when Jesus invites us into the way of the cross he beckons us to die to prevailing ideologies – especially the ideologies we project onto him – that we might be free to pick up a different kind of burden¹¹ for his sake and for the sake of the world he loves. *Give up your unbending certainties, he insists, your drive for self-preservation and success, your impulse to justify yourself in the eyes of others. Give up the worldly concerns that prevent you from seeing who I really am and why I've come to be with you. And, take up a way of life that will cost you everything you thought was important until now, yet that will lead us, and everyone who walks with us, to abundant life.*

¹¹ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2018-9-16/1918#resources>.