

Presbyterian Church of the Covenant  
September 13, 2015

TEXT: Mark 8:27-38

Right answer, wrong Jesus

Today, we begin a series using the lectionary texts from Mark's gospel – a series called "Questions and Conundrums from Jesus". And clearly, the first conundrum, the first question is "What is up with that bulletin cover?" Let me assure you that our copier is working fine – this is not the result of some ugly toner explosion. What it is, is an experience – one I'd like you to have right now. Here's what you do. Hold that blob about a foot in front of your face and stare, really stare at it for 30 seconds. Then, when I give the signal, close your eyes – don't squeeze them, just gently close them and look at the inside of your eyelids. What do you see?

It is Jesus. But would you have been as quick to say that about this? Is this your Jesus? Certainly not! And yet the reality, when we really face it, really focus on it is – "oh...yes". On paper, this is an experience of negative imagery – a little trick with the rods and cones in our eyes. In our scripture text today we find disciples faced with a negative imagery experience, too. Disciples back then in Caesarea Phillipi and perhaps today, disciples on Duncan Road.

READ MARK TEXT

This text is the hinge of Mark's gospel – not only the midpoint, but the turning point. Up until now, Jesus' ministry has been in Galilee, where it has been all about performing one act of power after another – over demons, over disease, over forces of nature. Which ought to have been pretty convincing evidence about his identity. But in Mark, disciples are at best confused and clueless, unable to see who it is right in front of their face. The gospel writer is not at all confused – he makes it plain in the very first verse of chapter 1: "The beginning of the good

news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” So we who read the gospel know from the start, and just shake our head at those disciples so blind to the truth.

And then the hinge happens – and as can happen with hinges, it pinches the fingers of well-intentioned disciples. There in Caesarea Phillipi, the disciples could look back with a view of Galilee – where they had been, what they had witnessed. Jesus asks his disciples two very direct questions. The first is about the word on the street – “Who do people say I am?” How would you answer that? Are we aware and engaged with those who may or may not know the “right answer” – who do people out there think Jesus is? Based on who we are as Christ’s body now – what kind of Jesus are we showing them?

But it’s the second question that gets at the crux of the matter. “Who do you say that I am?” And we who read the book, including that first verse at the beginning, can hardly contain ourselves. Like eager 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, we raise our faithful hands – pick me, Jesus! And when Peter says, “You are the Messiah – we nod, and give ourselves a point, too. Just like Peter, we know the right answer, don’t we. But those raised hands – ours, Peters – are what get pinched in the hinge of Mark’s gospel. Because the mighty wonders Jesus performed in the first half - the evidence of his Messiahship --- is held together, hinged together – with the truth about what his Messiahship means and where it leads. To rejection, to suffering, to a cross. And there is the conundrum. Ouch.

We who are used to crosses – in our sanctuaries, around our necks – have a hard time imagining how devastating it was for those disciples to hear this. For Jesus to be the Messiah was great news of the long awaited savior who would rescue them from their oppressors, Rome. The Messiah brought victory, he would turn the tables on their enemies, turn things

around for God's people – finally no more oppression, no more suffering. The disciples had seen what Jesus could do –he was the one! And in the midst of their victory dance-- he starts playing a funeral dirge? That's not our Messiah.

We don't know what Peter said when he pulled Jesus aside and rebuked him. But we can imagine. Don't you know who you are? You cast out demons, heal the sick, stop the wind! You are the one –the Messiah for heaven's sake! Right answer – wrong Jesus, Peter.

We do know what Jesus said. To Peter- "Get behind me, Satan – you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." And to the crowd – "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." A conundrum on steroids.

The thing is – the right answer to "Who do you say that I am?" comes with the conundrum of denying self, taking up cross, losing our lives – really letting loose our grip of control on our lives. Whether in the 1<sup>st</sup> century or the 21<sup>st</sup>, if we think that following Jesus is all about success and triumph and one big victory dance marathon, then we too need to hear again that while we may have the right answer, we have the wrong Jesus.

In our day and culture this flies in the face of everything we are taught to value and reward and therefore to strive for. We value and reward and strive for success- measured in strength, accumulation of resources, power over others, security, influence, winning. Even in the name of Christianity –albeit it distorted - we are seduced to believe that this is a legitimate expectation of believers. That's the sales pitch of the Prosperity Gospel and its pitchman Joel Osteen. Hear what he preaches to 10s of thousands in person and even more world-wide:

“There is a winner in you. You were created to be successful, to accomplish your goals, to leave your mark on this generation. You have greatness in you. The key is to get it out.” Or, “If you want success, if you want wisdom, if you want to be prosperous and healthy, you’re going to have to do more than meditate and believe – you must boldly declare words of faith and victory over yourself and your family.” Wrong Jesus. And having the wrong Jesus is so tempting. I mean who doesn’t want a Jesus who gets you everything you ever wanted?

This Jesus, that’s who. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” What disciples have always had to learn and relearn is that the Jesus who is the Messiah must undergo suffering and rejection. He must go on to do the hard thing, and that is a hard thing for those of us who want to walk comfortably in our Christian shoes.

Just to be clear, denying ourselves – it’s not living a miserable, self-demeaning, I don’t matter life. It is just the opposite. It is living a purposeful life as those who follow Jesus – meaning Jesus leads, and we do not. Losing our lives – it’s not a death sentence, it’s just the opposite. It is letting loose of our grip on controlling our lives, of saving ourselves through earning and winning. It is realizing that losing – something the world teaches us to fear and fight against - isn’t a fatal blow. What might you, what might we, be ready and willing to lose as we follow Jesus? An attitude, a grudge, a need for something that doesn’t truly satisfy, a tradition, a way of seeing ourselves or others, having things be the way they’ve always been?

How is this Jesus good news? Because, as David Lose points out, this Jesus “points to a God who meets us in vulnerability, in suffering, in loss. A God who meets us, that is, in those

moments when we really need God – when all we had worked for, hoped for, and striven for fall apart and we realize that we are, quite simply, mortal, incapable of saving ourselves and desperately in need of a God who meets us where we are. Which means that we don't get the God we want, but the God we need."

"Who do you say that I am?" It's not enough to get it, but to let it get you. That's why it's important to have not just the right answer, but the right Jesus – so that we'll be the right disciples. Each of us will learn who we are when we answer that question. To say "You are the Messiah" gives us our identity and purpose and path to follow. Let us be a living answer – by not taking the easy way, by bearing others' burdens, by making commitments that come with some sacrifice, by walking the uphill battles, by letting things loose and being willing to lose. Let us live the right answer by following the right Jesus, who leads us through this conundrum of a life – a conundrum in the shape of a cross.