

This Sunday's Sermon: Who Do You Say Jesus Is and Why?

This Sunday I will be preaching on Mark 8:27-38. This pivotal passage in Mark's gospel reveals the disciples of Jesus wrestling with Jesus' identity. Jesus asks them, "Who do you say that I am?" Eventually, Peter gives the correct answer ("the messiah"), but immediately he demonstrates his understanding of the title differs greatly from that of Jesus. Jesus understands himself to be a messiah (i.e. "savior") who will suffer and die rather than as a political and military leader who will wield earthly power.

Just before this story, Jesus heals a blind man, but strangely it takes two attempts. First the blind man can see people, but they look like moving trees. Jesus tries again and the man's vision becomes clear. Similarly, the disciples have been struggling to clearly see Jesus. They have been arguing about who Jesus is and what his miracles and teachings mean, but soon after Jesus' explanation of his identity, he is transfigured on top of a mountain. A few of his disciples get to see Jesus' glory but they have no understanding of what it means. The Gospel continues until the disciples at last abandon Jesus in his most desperate hour. Unlike the blind man, the disciples never seem to clearly see Jesus' identity, despite his many attempts to show them. A major irony in Mark is that the disciples who should know Jesus best don't seem to know him at all.

Mark's depiction of Jesus' disciples should cause all who bear the name Christian to proceed with caution. We may think we know who Jesus is and/or we may parrot the answers we have been taught about who Jesus is, but have we got it right? What does "right" mean in the case of Jesus anyway? We might call Jesus our savior, the Son of God, an enlightened teacher like Buddha or a prophet, but perhaps a better question might be "what difference does Jesus make in your life?"

In my decades in church, I've often heard Jesus described in terms of his death which was necessary for us to be saved from an eternity in Hell. This explanation for the difference Jesus makes in our lives is incomplete at best and theologically questionable at worst. I feel sure that Jesus' words to his followers: "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” mean much more than a ticket to heaven. Discipleship involves a transformation of one’s life, each and every day, and means more than our canned answers.