

Sermon on Mark 8:27-38  
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2009  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Two of the hardest things for any of us human beings to understand are: who is Jesus and what does it really mean for us to follow him. Whenever we think that we “get it”, and finally understand, we find that we have it all wrong. It’s like a lot of things in life: when we think we’ve got it, we don’t. So who is Jesus? People have had all kinds of answers for that throughout the past 2000 years. Jesus has been called a carpenter, a king, the Son of Mary and the Son of God, a shepherd, a radical, a teacher, a healer, a rabbi, a blasphemer, and the Savior of the world. So which is it? Or is all of the above? Who do *you* say that Jesus is?

In Mark’s gospel we catch up with Jesus walking through the villages north of Galilee beyond the Jordan river with his disciples, and on the way he asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” He had been preaching, teaching, and performing signs of healing and exorcisms, which had all made a great impression. Word about Jesus was spreading throughout Galilee and now beyond. So what were they saying? Who did people say that he was, Jesus wanted to know.

So they answered, “Some say you are John the Baptist (who had just been beheaded), and others Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.” Very interesting, and maybe even flattering, but none quite right. So, Jesus asked his disciples, you who are walking with me and following me, “who do *you* say that I am?” Nobody but Peter spoke up (somehow we knew that Peter would be the one to speak, right or wrong!). Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” With that, Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone this about him. Why? Who knows? Maybe they weren’t ready to accept him as Messiah, as his disciples were. Maybe they didn’t know what being the Messiah really means. Certainly his disciples didn’t. For the disciples had this basic understanding of God’s Messiah, that God had promised one day to send a “Messiah” (meaning “God’s anointed one”) to save God’s people from their enemies. To them this meant someone to save Israel from the Romans, and everyone else who oppressed them. This commonly meant a great king, a great warrior - or someone like Moses – to lead them to freedom and usher in the reign of God. To most this meant a violent revolution, a military uprising – for how else could they be rid of the great Roman legions?

But to Jesus, this is NOT what it meant to be the Messiah, and this was not what God had sent him to do. He was not going to set Israel free with a sword, or any other weapon of war. And he had not only been sent to free Israel. God had sent him to set the whole world free from sin and death, to bring everyone salvation and life forever, through faith. This could never be accomplished by acts

of war, only through faith in God and and by acts of love for others. This was how God's kingdom, God's reign would become reality on this earth, through faith, through human hearts. That would be hard for any human being to understand.

Hardest of all was this: God would do this through Jesus, who would show us all the way to the heart of God and reveal God's kingdom to us. Jesus would reveal the extent of God's love for all of us, for all humankind, by his willingness to suffer and even die for those who would betray him and persecute him most. God's Messiah would die, would be killed by the very hands of humans beings whom God was reaching down to save. So Jesus began to teach his disciples this difficult truth, that the Son of Man, this Messiah, "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."

Jesus' disciples were shocked. This was not the way that things were supposed to be. They were following Jesus because he was God's Messiah, who was going to lead them to new understandings about God, and new power and possibilities by being his followers. They weren't following him to see him die, and perhaps die themselves. This was not what they had signed on for! Peter took Jesus aside and told him so. Peter rebuked Jesus, maybe even saying out loud, "You lie! This can't be true! This can never happen to God's Messiah!" Maybe he even pledged his own life to prevent such a thing from happening.

Then Jesus said to Peter, the leader of his disciples, the star of his class: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Peter had it all wrong. Just when Peter just about had it right, by calling Jesus the "Messiah", he showed he had it all wrong by totally misunderstanding what Jesus, as Messiah, had been sent to do. Peter was acting just like Satan had in the wilderness, tempting Jesus with the human version of the way things were – that being God's Messiah was a task of power, not a calling to be humiliated like a servant or slave. Jesus had to reject this way of thinking.

So then Jesus called all the disciples and the crowd around him, and began to teach them the more difficult way to follow him, the way that leads to life and a new understanding of God. "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." He meant that if you and I want to achieve the true gift of life that Jesus offers, and follow him as our example in order to do that, we have to be willing to give up that life (for the sake of others) just when we are ready to grasp it. Now, if there's something more difficult to understand, I want to know it!

Let's put it another way. Let's say you are offered a gift, a prize at the end of a scavenger hunt, let's say, a precious pearl. You spend days, maybe weeks searching for it, following all the clues. Finally, you come to the end, and you see

the prize, this precious pearl within reach. But the last clue is this: in order to win the real prize, you have to be willing to give the pearl to someone else who needs it more. You thought all along that the pearl was the gift, the prize, and it was the reason you were hunting in the first place. But at the end of the hunt, you find the real prize was not in receiving the pearl for yourself, but in giving it to another! The true prize is life itself, and the gift of giving what is most precious to you to another. This is what Jesus did with his life - just when he found his true identity as the Son of God – God’s Messiah – he gave it up for the sake of others, for you and me. And Jesus invites you and me to discover this truth for ourselves, and become willing to give up what we find most precious and offer it for the sake of others. This is what true discipleship is when we follow Jesus, which is most difficult for all of us to understand. Because we humans think that the goal of life is to seek the prize (be it wisdom, or power, or pure enjoyment of life) and then to finally attain it, so that we can “have it” or “use it”. But Jesus is saying that the real gift of the prize of life, is not in receiving it but in giving it away!

So what do you think about that? It’s like if I said, as pastor of this Church, the real gift of the gospel is not for you and I to make use of it, but for you and me to share it with others. We will really have done God’s work with this Church when we have built it up (with God’s help) not to enjoy ourselves, but to give it away to others – for the sake of the good news! So, when we’re all done with our work of building this Church, you and I are called to give it away!

So, what do you have to say to all this? **“You lie!”** Now, that’s the reaction I would expect! What are we working for, if all we’re going to do is give it away? What are you thinking, Pastor? Where does it say THAT in the Bible? Well, there you go again, thinking like Peter, setting our minds not on things of God, but on human things....Actually, I don’t know if that’s what Jesus would tell us to do, but I’m thinking I’m on track with Jesus’ meaning. Why else would Jesus give up his own life when he was the only one who has truly found it? Because giving it up was the only way that we humans would have a chance to find our own! We can find our life by seeking it in him, receiving the gift of life that we have been given.

So what are you seeking most in life? How close are you to getting there? Are you willing to give it up, for the sake of the gospel? *“Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it,”* Jesus said. The good news today is that even when you cross the boundary of human reason, take Jesus up on his invitation, and “give up” what you most desire *in order that others may find life in Christ* – then you will most certainly find the way, the truth, and the life that Jesus is speaking of.

I know this is hard. I know you may not have understood a word that I have said. I don’t think I even understand it! But it’s not only understanding, it’s faith in God that Jesus is seeking to give us. So that we may all know the truth, which

sets us free. So God bless you on your journey, as you and I follow Jesus on this path that Jesus promises will lead us to life forever with him.