

## LET'S LET JESUS DEFINE HIS IDENTITY

MARK 9:30-37

SEPT. 22, 2024

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A clergy speaker at a seminar I attended many years ago told us that he was visiting a church member at her place of work. She was a sixth-grade elementary school teacher. And as he expected, he found that her classroom was a lively beehive of activity. The children under her care seemed so engaged in the subject.

As he knocked on the classroom door, he heard her call, *"Come on in."* (Remember I said this was a number of years ago before all the security that is found in so many classrooms today.)

When he came "on in." She said, *"Class, let me introduce you to my pastor. This is the man who looks after my spiritual welfare on Sundays so I can be your teacher during the week. Pastor, I am glad you dropped in on us. We have been studying World War I. Knowing that you are a bit of a history buff, I think it would be great for the students to ask you some of their questions about that time in history. I have about exhausted my capacity to explain that more to them."*

The pastor said that because he was no expert on World War I, he got a bit nervous, but he played along. He said, *"Sure, fire away."*

A girl, sitting on the front row, asked the first question, *"What's your opinion? You think World War I was a completely senseless act, or do you think some good came out of it?"*

*"Er, uh, well I guess that out of World War I came the beginnings of the dismantling of colonialism and imperialism, and that's something. Also, the Russian Revolution, if you think that's good,"* He said, struggling to find a good answer.

*"But do you think war is ever a good solution?"* asked a redheaded boy a couple of rows behind her.

*"Good question. When one considers the huge loss of life, the destruction of so many towns and cities, you've got to ask if that war, or maybe any war, was worth it."* He suggested.

*"As a Christian,"* asks another child, *"do you believe war is ever the answer to anything?"*

*"No, you've got me there. It's hard to justify any war on the basis of Jesus Christ,"* he admitted. By that time, he said, he was perspiring heavily.

So went the questions for a good 30 minutes. He told them that he had to leave. On his way out of the classroom the teacher accompanied him down the hall. And on the way the pastor told his parishioner teacher, *"Wow. Their questions! They asked things that I have not thought about for a long time but should have."*

The teacher agreed that they sure can ask questions. But she then added, *"Sad, when you think about it. It seems that as we grow up, our questions get smaller. I want to be the sort of teacher that encourages students to keep asking good questions."*

I think that's a great aspiration for any teacher.

So, let's look at the biblical version of this story. In this Sunday's gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples one of the most difficult, hard to understand truths about himself. He tells them, once again that the Son of Man, *"will be delivered into human hands. They will kill him. Three days after he is killed, he will rise up."*

And even though Jesus is repeating what he has told them before, Mark says, *"they didn't understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him."*

A Messiah who suffers? The holy one of God who fails in his mission to the world? The Son of God

a victim of human cruelty and betrayal, used and abused? How can this be?

Of course, the disciples continued to fail in their attempts to understand Jesus, even when he repeats his prediction. Down through the ages, the church has had trouble getting its head around the notion of a suffering God. They did not understand this kind of talk and were afraid to ask him any questions.

I wonder if we are not like them.

I really find it interesting that in two chapters in a row, chapters 8 and 9, we see Jesus in similar situations. We just read from chapter 9 but if you go back to chapter 8 you will find that Jesus had been in Bethsaida where he had just healed a blind man and they were then on their way to the village of Caesarea Philippi and while they were on the way Jesus 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?”* Peter answered him, *“You are the Messiah.”*

In chapter 8 when Jesus tells them this, Peter takes Jesus aside and decides it is time to help Jesus understand who the Messiah really is, after all the prophets had told them that a Messiah would come and rescue them and what Jesus had just told them did not match up and the things he told them could get him killed and then how would he rescue them.

In the end we have to let Jesus define himself and then decide if we will still follow him.

There are many today who continue to try to tell us who this Jesus really is and we need to be careful whose voices to which we will listen. There is a place for biblical scholars who have taken the time to carefully consider the total life and teachings of Jesus Christ, an exercise that most do not have the skills or time to do.

The judgment of past generations deserves some weight. We must study those times when people have been faithful to Jesus’ definition of himself and followed and times when people, like Peter, could not accept this teaching.

There is the judgment of other groups—for example, the oppressed of the earth. We hear them speak in some of the best music available to us, the Black Spirituals. Who do these people say that he is? They said with strong conviction that he has been one who has preached the good news to the poor, brought release to the captives, and liberty to those who are oppressed.

And the fourth group whose verdict carries the greatest weight. No amount of historical exploration or general knowledge can be a substitute for a person verdict. And even then we have to be careful that we are not like Peter suggesting that we know better than Christ and proclaim a mistaken definition. We must let Jesus define himself and decide if we will follow his definition or not.

It is interesting to see the response of Barclay in his commentary on Mark. He wrote, *“When they did not understand, they were afraid to ask further questions, they were like people who might receive a verdict from his doctor. He might assume that it sounds like it is bad, but not understanding all the details, we are afraid to ask any more questions because we are afraid to know more.”*

But he goes on to say, *“The human mind has an amazing faculty for rejecting that it does not wish to see.”* For example, he says, *“Over and over again we have heard the Christian message. We know the glory of accepting it and the tragedy of rejecting it, but many are just as far off as ever from giving it our full allegiance and molding our lives to fit it. Men still accept the parts of the Christian message which they like and which suit them and refuse to understand the rest.”*

But the thing that interests me about this Sunday’s gospel is Mark’s comment that the disciples not only did not understand—after all, it is the Gospel of Mark where the disciples never understand much of anything—but rather that the disciples were reluctant to ask him any questions.

You see our text is in the context of Jesus’ disciples arguing among themselves of which of them

would be greatest in the kingdom. When Jesus asked what they were talking about *“they were silent.”* They did not answer the question.

And before we are too hard on these disciples, we all should admit that we are also reluctant to ask Jesus some of our most perplexing questions. Nobody likes to look stupid. Least of all, in church.

Mark says that here were 12 people who had left their homes, their jobs, and had ventured forth as disciples of Jesus. They were his privileged, inner circle who heard all of his teaching and witnessed all of his wondrous works. And yet, deep into Mark’s Gospel, they don’t understand some of his most important teaching, even when he repeats it. Again, particularly when it is not what they wanted or expected to hear.

So maybe the first thing that we are to learn from this morning’s gospel is that from the first, even among his closest followers, there were many who did not understand him. If you are someone who is frequently baffled by Jesus, take heart: so were Peter, James, and John.

Will Willimon, in one of the Lenten studies we used here at UBC said when he was Dean at Duke Chapel, during Holy Week on Wednesday night, he invited the famous Duke novelist Reynolds Price to read from his translation of the Gospel of Mark.

Reynolds would be set up in the reading room of the Duke Library (because they were hoping to attract those who might not want to venture into the Chapel). Reynolds would then read through his translation of Mark, start to finish. (By the way, that is not as a daunting task as you might imagine. Remember it is the shortest of the gospels and is only sixteen chapters long and one of those only has 20 verses.

In Reynolds’ translation of Mark, he translated the word *“disciple”* as “student,” thinking that was the best way to translate the Greek word used for *“disciple”* since Mark’s favorite designation for Jesus is *“rabbi,”* or teacher.

One year, after Reynolds had finished his reading, as everyone was departing the room, a graduate student came up to Willimon and ask, *“Hey, did they ever get the point?”*

*“They?”*

*“Yeah, his students. Did they ever get the point? They seem to be just as dumb at the end of Mark as they were at the beginning, maybe even dumber,”* said the student.

Willimon smiled at the student and responded, *“True, they go from dumb to dumber. I guess you would have to be a Christian to know that’s why many of us love the Gospel of Mark. I may have lots that I don’t understand about Jesus, but at least I know more than Simon Peter!”*

Take heart! If you who are befuddled by Jesus, confused about who he is and what he is up to in the world, so it was from the very beginning, from the start, even with his closest, first disciples.

But perhaps more importantly, Mark wants to reassure us that even in our questions, even the questions we are too afraid to dare ask, Jesus does not reject or turn away from us. He continues to teach us, patient with our misunderstanding, forbearing with our inability to ask the right questions, our hesitance to appear to be dumb.

And the very next thing that occurs is that the disciples get into a squabble over who is the greatest in the kingdom: *“When we get him elected Messiah, and the kingdom comes, who will get to sit on the cabinet?”*

In their dispute over greatness the disciples show that they are clueless about Jesus and his mission. Jesus has just declared to them repeatedly that he will be betrayed, that he will be handed over for torture, that he will suffer, and die a humiliating death, and here are his 12 closest followers arguing over who is the greatest. The argument shows that they haven’t understood anything he said.

Which I think helps to explain why the next thing that Jesus does—after Mark notes that the

disciples were too afraid to ask him their questions, after the disciples' dispute among themselves over greatness *"Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said, 'Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me.'"*

It's as if Jesus the teacher is using the child as an object lesson. The disciples have been arguing about greatness. They believe that following Jesus is their path to power and glory. In one last-ditch effort to teach them his True Way, Jesus takes a little child and puts the child in the midst of the disciples. Then he says to them that when we receive one such child, we receive Jesus.

I know that down through the ages people have speculated on what is there about the child that leads Jesus to urge his disciples to receive him as a child and to receive a child as if they were receiving him. You've probably heard sermons extolling the virtue of *"childlike faith."*

But I believe in the context of this passage, the main thing we ought to note about the child is that the child is a blank slate, so to speak. Human beings come into the world totally dependent on others, needing constant care, having few instinctual abilities. A baby kitten knows more about how to survive than a human infant.

Children may be affectionate and responsive, but they must be taught everything. The major business of childhood, in school or out, is education, learning, exploration, and discovery. That is another reason why we must teach them what Jesus said, himself, about who he is and what he has taught that we his followers must do.

And Jesus says that in welcoming the dependent, ignorant, uninformed, untutored child, we welcome him. Maybe Jesus is pointing to the irony that he has gathered about him, in his disciples, a bunch of adults who are like children in their understanding of him. His disciples they may be, but they are dependent, ignorant, uninformed, and untutored— children, so far as their salvation is concerned.

So maybe we are to be encouraged by today's gospel. We are to be encouraged in the questions that we ask, and the questions that we dare not ask, encouraged in our misunderstanding and total lack of understanding.

Take heart! Jesus does not turn away from his disciples because they didn't get the point. He does not reject them because of their continued incomprehension. He patiently continues to teach them. He will continue to reiterate his identity and mission to them. He answers their questions when they have the fortitude to venture a question. He keeps on loving them and will, in great suffering, serve them, even when they don't understand.

He keeps trying. In Matthew you may remember reading this statement: *40 and the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'* *41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'* *44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?'* *45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'*

Even though there may be things about this morning's sermon that you don't understand, I hope you understand that fully comprehending and understanding Jesus may not be the point. The point is to follow, to allow yourself to be loved by him. To be the child who has to be taught and willing to listen carefully to words of Jesus as he defines himself and his mission before others jump in to confuse us, as others had done to Peter. Any questions?