

Divine Things

Mark 8:27-38

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

September 15, 2024/Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

As I mentioned last Sunday, we're going to be spending time in the gospel of Mark this fall.

We'll have a few Sundays here and there where we take a break (guest speakers, Sundays where we have other themes, etc.). And we're not going to cover the whole book.

We are simply going to drop in here and there and see what Jesus is up to and what this has to do with us all these years later.

Today we're looking at a famous question and a famous response. The question comes from Jesus: Who do you say that I am? And the response comes from Peter: "You are the Messiah."

It's the moment where one of the disciples first makes a public proclamation of Jesus' identity. It's also followed by a bit of confusion and confrontation, as you've already heard and as we'll see.

I want to begin with a story that I've shared before, but it's been over a decade, so I think I'm safe.

It was a Sunday morning. I had just finished my sermon for the morning and I kind of collapsed into my seat.

It had been an exhausting week. I'd been single parenting (Naomi was in Victoria running a half-marathon) and dealing with a bunch of other issues that were taking far more time and energy than I had to give.

I was done. All I wanted to do was finish the service and stagger home for a nap. At this precise moment of peak exhaustion and vulnerability, my dear son leaned over to me and said, “Jesus is hard to find.”

Well. Clearly, I was about to add a pre-teen spiritual crisis to my weekend to-do list! *What do you mean?* I whispered frantically, all kinds of plaintive angst no doubt dripping off my frantic tongue. *Could we talk about this later, please?!*

He pointed absently to the kids’ word search in the bulletin on his lap. “Jesus” is the last word in the list, and I can’t find it anywhere.”

Crisis averted, I guess 😊

The phrase stuck with me, though. *Jesus is hard to find.*

Yes, it’s true, he is. And not just in word searches.

For starters, the Jesus we encounter is always Jesus through some other lens. We don’t ever just encounter Jesus himself, but *someone’s* conception of Jesus.

We accept the four gospels as the authoritative portrayal of who Jesus was, what he did and what he meant. We accept the letters and other documents of the New Testament as inspired by God to unpack and interpret the good news of Jesus’ gospel as it made its way in the world.

So, yes, there is an important sense in which God “authored” the texts through which we encounter Jesus.

But on some level, we are still relying on the testimony of other people. And as we know, people can and do see the same things differently.

Even the four gospels don’t each portray Jesus in the exact same way. In Matthew’s version of today’s story, for example, Peter’s declaration of Jesus’ identity includes “you are the son of the living God,” and is followed by Jesus blessing Peter, saying that God alone could have revealed this to him.

In Mark, Jesus doesn’t affirm Peter at all; he simply says, “Don’t tell anyone.”

And then there's the question of how we interpret the Scriptures which point us to Jesus. It will not come as news to you that people *have* found and *continue* to find a wide variety of Jesuses in the New Testament.

Some find an activist Jesus who is fed up with our middle-class apathy and privilege and wants us to agitate for social justice.

Some find a mystical Jesus who lives mostly in silent retreats and exotic pilgrimages.

Some find a harsh, conservative Jesus who wants us to talk mostly about his blood and our sin, who wants us to spend our days aggressively proselytizing.

Some find a mushy liberal Jesus who wants us to talk about love and compassion, but hardly ever about *himself* (that would be exclusive and intolerant).

Many find a political Jesus that cares very much (and in the same way) about all the issues they do.

The list could go on. So many Jesuses... The real one can often seem elusive.

We want to find Jesus, we say, but we would prefer it if the Jesus we "found" would conform more neatly to our expectations and preferences, our politics, our theology.

We would like Jesus to be against the people who annoy us and for people like, well, us.

How do we find the "real" Jesus?

Well, at the very least, we wrestle with difficult texts like today's. We don't shy away from the hard things Jesus says. We remain open to a Jesus who can unsettle and annoy and confuse and shock us.

Our text this morning also deals with a question of who, exactly, the real Jesus is.

Peter's declaration, "You are the Messiah" has echoed down through the ages.

But the word “Messiah” is one of those words that we may be *too* familiar with. We know it relates to Jesus somehow, we may know that it is a term that comes out of Israel’s history, but it’s a strange word for us.

We know what the words “president” or “prime minister” or even “rabbi” and “priest” mean, but “Messiah?” That we’re not so sure about.

A bit of background: The setting of this conversation is important. It says that Jesus asks his disciples about who they say he is in Caesarea Philippi. This was way north of Jerusalem, way north even of Galilee (1.5 hours by car today in the Golan Heights). It seems like an odd place to go for a lesson on Jesus’ identity.

Caesarea Philippi was a hotbed of religious experimentation—everything from paganism to various Greek religions. It was also home to a prominent temple devoted to the newest pagan God—the Roman Emperor himself!

And in *this* context, Peter confesses Jesus as the “Messiah.” What would this word have meant in this context?

It didn’t mean “divine being” or “second person of the Trinity.” Jesus would be revealed as these things later on, but not at this point in the story.

At this point in the story, the word “Messiah” was a *political* title.

For Jewish readers and listeners, the word “Messiah” would have meant someone who would liberate Israel from the Roman Empire, who would restore political autonomy to Israel, and kick in the reign of peace and worship of God.

Messiahs had to do at least three things:

1. Rebuild/ cleanse the temple
2. Defeat the enemy that was threatening God’s people (Rome, at that time)
3. Bring God’s justice to bear—in Israel and throughout the world

This is what people expected from their Messiahs. This is likely what Peter had in mind when he made his declaration that Jesus is the Messiah.

And Jesus doesn't correct him. In fact, he very publicly affirms Peter's statement. Jesus identifies himself as the Messiah. Right there in the city where an image of the Roman Emperor was worshiped.

This is exciting stuff. You can almost sense the disciples' enthusiasm. *Finally*, things are going to turn around for them and their people. The Messiah is going to put people in their place and make things right!

But what happens after Peter's declaration of Jesus' identity?

Jesus starts talking about suffering and dying at the hands of the religious leaders.

Peter is not having it. He has his checklist of what Messiahs do and suffering and dying are not on it! He takes Jesus aside and tries to set him straight. Maybe he needs a refresher on the job description.

Jesus has strong words for him in return: "Get behind me Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but human things."

(If we thought calling a Gentile woman a "dog" was bad last week, how about being called "Satan?!" And mere minutes after Peter was thinking he was the star student in the class!)

Peter goes from hero to zero pretty quickly here. He shows that even though he understood *some* things about who Jesus was, there was a *lot* that he didn't know.

He had his own concerns in mind—human concerns, concerns about his nation, possibly about revenge, about political action—not God's.

Jesus accepts Peter's initial (correct) statement of his identity but then begins to redefine it.

Jesus says, "Yes, I am the Messiah. Now let me show you what that means.

It means that I will suffer and die for the sake of my people.

It means that the way that God redeems and reclaims a world crippled by human wickedness is by suffering it *himself* through me.

It means that political might and violence are not the ways in which the Kingdom of God comes.

It means that suffering precedes glory.

Jesus could not be clearer about this. Suffering, taking up crosses, these are the “divine things” that Jesus contrasts with the “human things” Peter is implicitly more interested in, ruling, reigning, overthrowing, winning.

And Peter was not alone in this, we should note. He was just the first one to open his mouth. James and John wanted seats of power at his right and left. And Christians down through the ages, right to the present, have often been more interested in “human things” than “divine things.”

It means, Jesus is saying, that God works differently than you might imagine or want.

And, as if all this talk about Jesus himself suffering wasn’t enough, Jesus says, “and this will be your path, too.” If you want to follow me, get ready to deny themselves and take up a cross. Saving your life will mean losing it, and losing it for my sake will mean saving it. If you’re ashamed of me, I will be ashamed of you I come in glory.”

Whew. This is, it must be said, an absolutely terrible sales pitch for recruiting followers!

I mentioned Meghan Larissa Good’s new book *Divine Gravity* last week. She calls Jesus summons the “anti-pitch”:

An interesting thing about Jesus is how little effort he seems to make to “sell” his Way with rhetorical pitches and promise desirable outcomes. Modern advertising by contrast is full of such dazzling promises: Lose ten pounds and never feel hungry! Get rich while working eight hours a week! Land a ring from a good-looking doctor with five easy steps! Erase twenty years with this magical face cream!

Jesus doesn’t promise health. He doesn’t promise wealth. He doesn’t promise popularity... He doesn’t promise safety; he doesn’t even promise less suffering. **At times you’d almost think he was trying to talk people out of following him.** But for those who know how to hear it, there’s a deep integrity to his anti-pitch. Jesus presents the naked truth of a world with no shortcuts. There are no quick fixes or

painless roads. Anything worth having comes with a cost. Possessing something priceless will cost you everything.¹

How did a message this countercultural, a sales pitch this bad, ever take hold in the world?

Well, the resurrection, for one. The resurrection validated Jesus' identity and everything he taught (including all the hard stuff about suffering) and shot the first disciples out into the world like a cannon.

But even beyond that, I think there we see something deeply true about who we are in Jesus' call to self-denial.

I think that we intuitively know that clinging to our lives, living for ourselves and our preferences is a bad way to move through life. Perhaps some part of us knows that love, if it is to mean anything real, must cost something.

There are two famous questions in this passage. The first, we've looked at: "Who do you say that I am?"

The second comes near the end: "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

This is a haunting, penetrating question. It is a question asked of each one of us.

It's easy to think of "soul" as some immaterial, ghostly entity that will survive our physical deaths and float off into the clouds.

But that's not what the word would have meant to Jesus' initial hearers. The "soul" simply referred to the deepest part of a human being.

"Soul" points to the part of you that makes you *you*.

The part of us that is always stretching toward a goodness we are convinced has yet to be fully realized, a kingdom we long to see coming.

¹ Meghan Larissa Good, *Divine Gravity: Sparking a Movement to Recover a Better Christian Story* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2023), 97.

The part of us that craves eternity. The part of us that weeps for the world's wickedness and hungers for the losers to get a taste of winning. The part of us that is desperate for mercy.

The part of us that longs for eyes to truly see the Love that is writing the story we are a part of.

The part of us that somehow knows that this beautiful, baffling Jesus holds the key to losing those parts of us that we were never meant to cling to in order to gain the life that we were created for.

This is the part of us that Jesus is urging us not to lose in chasing after smaller, more self-protective things.

A final word.

I began by saying that Jesus is hard to find. We can never get at him without peeling through someone else's understanding, someone else's description, someone else's experience.

Maybe this isn't a bug in the system, something to lament. Maybe there's something more profound going on here.

Maybe Jesus is ok with entrusting himself to fragile, fallen human beings. Maybe he's ok with allowing his reputation to be sullied by his followers.

Maybe Jesus is saying, "you don't get me without each other."

He is binding us to one another, saying, "You don't get to make this a private affair. I belong to all of you—across time and space, all the inspiring parts of the family tree and all of the less inspiring parts—and you all belong to me and we're going to walk this road of life and faith and suffering and learning and longing together."

This is how we find Jesus. By encountering him—even when he says really hard and confusing and countercultural things—together.

And by discovering—together—that the hard path is ultimately the liberating path that leads to life and love in their fullness.

Amen.

