

Year B Proper 24 Getting the Label Right but the Understanding Wrong Mark 8:27-38

This Gospel reading is nearly smack-dab in the middle of Mark's Gospel and in today's story we are witness to a major shift in the plot. We haven't heard a word about Jesus being the Messiah since the opening words of the Gospel. What we have seen, though, is a whole lot of Jesus in action – teaching, healing, performing miracles, leaving people wondering, “Who is this amazing person? Who is this who speaks and acts with the authority of God?”

Today, Jesus confronts this identity question head on. It turns out that he not only clears up his own identity but he also sheds light on what that means for us as his followers. And he does this in a highly Roman neck of the woods – the villages of Caesarea Philippi. This backdrop is very important to our understanding of this passage so we will come back to it.

In the heart of Roman country, Jesus pops the question, “Who do people say that I am.” That's an easy one to answer – The disciples simply offer up all of the local scuttlebutt they've been hearing... “Some say you're John the Baptist, some say Elijah, or another great prophet,” they tell him. These are all very sensible suggestions. Jesus has been encouraging repentance like John the Baptist. He brought a child back to life just as Elijah did. He fed a huge crowd in the middle of nowhere like Moses did in the wilderness.

Then Jesus asks a much more pointed question, “You who have been traveling with me, you who know me well – who do you say I am?” Peter, as is typical, is the first to blurt something out. What he says is astounding. “You are the Messiah!” he declares. We know the whole story and we know Peter is right. But, the answer Peter gives is not actually very logical. The title “Messiah” in Hebrew or “Christ” in Greek was associated in Jewish tradition with an anointed king, a royal figure from

the line of David expected to come and free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify the people, and restore Israel's independence and glory.

Jesus, the poor, wandering teacher and healer sure doesn't look or act very kingly. He hasn't expressed any political ambitions, he hasn't – until this point – claimed to be the Messiah. He isn't amassing fighters to take on the Romans – he has surrounded himself with fishermen, tax collectors, and women.

Perhaps Peter was left wondering at his own, spontaneous declaration. Jesus did not fit the traditional idea of the long-awaited Messiah. So, when Jesus started describing what kind of Messiah he was going to be – one who suffered at the hands of the religious establishment, one who was murdered, and then raised on the third day – whatever that means – Peter quite understandably put on the brakes.

"Whoa, this is nuts," Peter said. "The Messiah does not suffer and die." Jesus' reaction to Peter is swift and harsh. "Get behind me, Satan!" he tells Peter. "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

As it turns out, Peter got the label right – Jesus is the Messiah – but he got the understanding of it wrong.

Peter's response is understandable in light of Jewish messianic expectations, which are perhaps not so very different from what we want in a Saviour. We want someone who is strong and powerful, someone who will rescue us from our troubles and defeat our enemies. Too often in popular evangelism, Jesus is presented in this way – as a kind of superhero who solves every problem for us, heals every sickness if we just ask the right way and really mean it, a guarantor of prosperity and success.

William Willimon writes of a folder he received in the mail one day. It was from an "evangelist" in Arizona assuring him that God has something good to give him. It

asked whether he needed a new car or if he were suffering from financial problems. The folder promised a plan through which God would bless him beyond his wildest dreams. For an initial investment of just 10 dollars he can begin to receive all these good things from God – or so the folder says. The folder is full of testimonials from people who received this or that, all because they prayed and sent money to this man and his organization. “Jesus Christ is the best deal a person ever had,” exclaims one woman from the Midwest. She was given a promotion in her job and a substantial raise – all because she became a Christian and started sending money to this evangelist. Another evangelist, says Willimon, has written a best seller – *How to Stay on Top* (Sunday Dinner, 82).

Like Peter, these people – and many others – have gotten the label right...Jesus is the Messiah, he is our Saviour and God does have something good for us. But they, perhaps we too, have gotten the understanding wrong. As with Peter, Jesus’ correction of these people and us, hits like a hammer blow. “You are wrong,” Jesus says, “You are not thinking the way God would have you think. You are thinking the human way.”

Perhaps you are saying to yourself, “Well, we are human, of course we think like humans.” But, as Jesus bangs his head against the proverbial brick wall, this passage tells us point blank that our way is the wrong way. This is one of those moments in Scripture that highlights the vast distance between us and God. Though Jesus is God with us, we cannot tame him or make him over into our image. Many Christians constantly try to bend God to their will with their grocery list type prayers of wants and needs – forgetting to add the important, frightening part... “Not my will, Lord, yours.” Like Peter, we want a strong, successful saviour through whom we are strong and successful – winners in life. Jesus, however, shows us again and again that

he insists on identifying with the lowliest of losers. He will allow himself to be judged and condemned as a blasphemer by Jewish religious leaders. He will allow himself to be mocked, tortured, and executed as a criminal by the Romans.

Just as Jesus corrects the understanding of his label of Messiah, he corrects the disciples' understanding of their label of "follower." Jesus is the Messiah. Under that label are all the things that make up his identity – his teaching, compassion, healing, his suffering and death. They all go into forming his identity. Jesus tells us that under our label of "follower" or, in modern terms, "Christian," there are certain things that form our identity. In the villages of Caesarea Philippi, under the shadow of the Roman empire, Jesus knows that his followers think and act, they form their identity, according to the ways of empire.

In the empire, might is admired, wealth and status are admired. In the empire, there is a social hierarchy and rules that go along with that. There is a wealth imbalance and oppression and crime that go along with that. In the empire, self comes before others and freedom means being able to do what you want rather than being able to choose to do good for those others. Empire is what God freed the Israelites from when Moses led them out of Egypt. Yet the Israelites gradually slipped back into the ways and thinking of life in the empire rather than adopt the new, radical way of thinking and living in God's kingdom. Empire is what Jesus died resisting and yet we now live in a world where the people living according to the ways and thinking of life in the empire seem to far outweigh those living according to life in God's kingdom.

Jesus knows that we, like his disciples so long ago, live under the shadow of empire. Knowing the difficult task he sets before us, Jesus lays out the two ways of being that should form our identity beneath our label of Christian. We must deny ourselves, he says, deny ourselves and take up our cross.

The self-denial Jesus speaks of here is not about squashing our desires or delaying gratification. Jesus wants us to separate ourselves from the ways of the world that define us – who we associate with and what we do forms our identity. Jesus wants us to form our identity based on our association with him and his ways. It is a redefinition of who we are.

Likewise, “it is important to be clear about what Jesus means by taking up the cross. He is not talking about the suffering that is simply part of life in a broken world — everything from annoying neighbours to serious illness to natural disasters. Neither is he telling us to seek out suffering or martyrdom. Jesus himself did not seek it, but he foresaw that it would be the inevitable outcome of his mission.

Jesus speaks of losing our lives for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel. Taking up our cross means being willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences might be. It means putting Jesus’ priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means being willing to lose our lives by spending them for others — using our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others might experience God’s love made known in Jesus Christ. New Testament professor, Matt Skinner, puts it bluntly: Cross-bearing means much more than patience or obedience, he says. It means death. It means the resignation of one’s reputation and life. Crosses imply rejection; those who bore crosses in the Roman imperial world were publicly declaring that their society or their leaders had denied them. Those who follow Jesus, associating with this vividly rejected Christ, take on an identity and a way of living that pose threats to the world’s corrosive ideologies and idolatries.

How can we possibly do this? Our instinct for self-preservation fights it at every step” (Elisabeth Johnson, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Our misunderstanding of the Messiah

label and the Christian label makes it difficult as well. We want the strong Messiah who fixes everything and as Christians following this Messiah, we should be protected from life's big blows. Many of think this way even when we don't realize we do. I've been there – I've been angry with God when something bad happened, thinking "Why are you letting this happen?" When things are going our way, we feel blessed, and when things go sour, we sometimes feel betrayed by God.

We are much like the twelve disciples who listened to these words straight from Jesus' mouth – deny yourself, take up your cross. These disciples argued about who would be the greatest in God's kingdom. These disciples fled when the going got rough in the Garden of Gethsemane. We sign on for the glory of it all, Willimon writes, not the pain. "Let this cup pass from us," he writes (Sunday Dinner, 83). Like Jesus in the garden though, we must remember to add the important, frightening words: "Not my will, Lord, yours."

Jesus confronts us today with a difficult description of what our lives must entail beneath our label of Christian. Jesus gives us our life when we follow him – not just our physical life but our inmost being, who we are. "Indeed," Jesus asks us, "what can you give in return for your life?" He has already given us the answer. We choose what forms our identity beneath the label.