

“Who Is Jesus?”

The Rev. Drew Willard
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Isa. 50:4-9a

Mark 8:27-38

*‘Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi;
and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”’*

Mark 8:27-38

Let us pray... O God,

Who is Jesus? It seems like a simple question,
but who is ‘Jesus’ of the Bible and our tradition?

Who is ‘Jesus’ of the Fundamentalist Christians?

Who is ‘Jesus’ for each of us –

for any of us, anywhere, here and now?

Who is Jesus? Is he the same as you, God?

Do we pray to him like we pray to you?

Does it matter? Should it matter to us? Does it matter to you?

Are you with us? Or should we be asking, ‘Are we with you?’

So often in our lives, it seems like we are on the run.

Are you running with us, too?

Are you running with me, Jesus?

Amen

Who is Jesus?

Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is –

and even though they’ve literally been on the road with him a long time,
they still have trouble getting it right – even Peter.

Kate Huey is a writer for the UCC website’s Sermon Seeds
and her response to that question is...

*More conservative voices have a clear and compelling answer
about Jesus’ identity and our need,*

first, to accept him as our Lord and Savior,

and second, to convince others to do the same.

*More progressive voices seem to strive to explore the mystery
of who Jesus was and who Jesus is in our lives today;*

they also seem to focus on Jesus’ actions

as much as his words in order to understand his identity.

www.ucc.org/worship/samuel_9/16/12 sermon seeds

Willard, p.2

Jesus as 'Lord and Savior' is certainly the *right* answer
and we ought to *tell it to the world* – but just what does that mean?
Who is Jesus to you as 'Lord and Savior'
and just what would you tell others that means?
So, let's try "exploring the mystery"...

In answering the question of 'Who is Jesus?',
I think we have to deal with another question:
"Who is God?" which is related to another question,
"Who do you pray to?"
As traditional Christians, we believe in God as a Trinity,
So, do you pray to 'God'? or 'Jesus'? or 'Spirit' as in the 'Holy Spirit'?
And why do you pray?

Malcolm Boyd, an Episcopal priest and activist, wrote a collection of prayer-poems
that has become a modern Christian classic,
Are You Running With Me, Jesus?
These are prayers that bridge the sacred and the profane of daily life
as people of the 'Now Generation' – back then in the 1960s,
were inclined to do.

Many people were questioning the status quo back then
to see what was real and whether or not our society
was just doing things because 'we always did it that way'.
Needless to say it was a painful transformation –
though a necessary one.
Listen to the honesty and depth of this prayer by Malcolm Boyd:

*It seems to me we have all prayed a long time about situations like this,
yet have done little or nothing to change them.
Maybe we thought prayer was magic, Jesus,
and decided we didn't need to cooperate actively with you
in working for a better world.*

Do we think of prayer as 'magic' like Malcolm Boyd said in his prayer?
Is it like a child's wish-list to Santa Claus?
Or is prayer and our relationship with God more dynamic than that?
Is there something expected in return – or *along with* our prayers
so as to 'cooperate actively' with God – or rather Jesus,
as Malcolm Boyd said?

Willard, p.3

In answering the question of 'Who is Jesus?',
we must consider our relationship with God through Christ
as individuals and as a community.

That was what Jesus was getting at when he rebuked the Apostle Peter;
He was trying to get Peter to open up his thinking – his heart and mind,
to recognize the relationship God has with us
and the dynamics of Jesus' liberating mission as the Messiah
who is our Savior.

Our Hebrew Scripture Lesson today provides us with one of
the four Songs of the Suffering Servant from the Book of Isaiah.
They describe a prophetic figure who is vulnerable, yet boldly declares,
'...the Lord God keeps me from being disgraced.
So I refuse to give up, because I know God will never let me down.'

Isa. 50:7

Jesus' statement – that the Son of Man, the True Heir of Humanity,
will suffer and die though eventually be raised from the dead,
sounds fatalistic and alarming to his disciples.

But it was in keeping with Isaiah's vision of the Servant of God
and Jesus was telling them how that vision of the Messiah – or the Christ,
would be realized through his mission to suffer and die, yet rise again.

And this event would serve as a reference point
not only for anyone in their personal experience,
but for human history itself.

Rene Girard – both an anthropologist and a Christian,
has interpreted Jesus' crucifixion & resurrection as being such an event.
Basically, his theory is that sacrificing a scapegoat
is the way human societies are created and a false peace is maintained
through a falsely legalized violence.

Though God is often represented as a harsh judge in the Hebrew Scriptures,
Rene Girard sees God through Christ in the Gospels as nonviolent
'...whose demand is for nonviolence rather than sacrifice'.
And Jesus' innocence and unjust death serves to expose sacrifice
as a game of naming, blaming, and shaming that is
'unworkable, at least in the long run'
and will ultimately bring the vicious cycle of sacrifice to an end.

Girard, Rene, "Mimesis and Violence", The Girard Reader, (1996), p.18

Then, we can see the humanity of those we thought were our enemies
whom we might have otherwise victimized and sacrificed
or have been treated that way ourselves, in turn...

Willard, p.4

So, who is Jesus?

Jesus is the bridge between the sacred and the profane
within us, and between God & us.

Jesus is the Holy One of God who endured
the obscenity and humiliation of a violent death
to affirm the relationship between all human-kind and God.

And the building block of that relationship is prayer –
the kind of prayer that Malcolm Boyd said
invites us to ‘actively cooperate’ with God;
And Jesus is One whom we can pray to as God –
Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the Suffering Servant of God – the Messiah, the Christ,
who is our example for picking up the cross of personal responsibility,
to ‘actively cooperate’ by living a life of love.

Jesus is the Liberator – our Savior,
who heals and rescues us from all oppression.

And Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life that lasts;
he is the Good Shepherd, the Gateway, the Light of the World,
the Bread of Life, the True Vine,
the Resurrection and the Life yet ahead.

He is the reliable Software to access the Spiritual Internet.

Jesus is the Word – the Word that is the Name of God come to life.

Jesus is love personified as the God you can talk to,
the God who is running along with you.

Amen

Isa. 50:4-9a

4 The Lord God gives me the right words to encourage the weary.

Each morning he awakens me eager to learn his teaching;

5 he made me willing to listen

and not rebel or run away.

6 I let them beat my back and pull out my beard.

I didn't turn aside when they insulted me and spit in my face.

7 But the Lord God keeps me from being disgraced.

So I refuse to give up, because I know God will never let me down.

8 My protector is nearby; no one can stand here to accuse me of wrong.

9 The Lord God will help me and prove I am innocent.

Inspired by Mark 8:27-9:1

AND JESUS WENT WITH HIS DISCIPLES
TO THE VILLAGES OF CAESAREA-PHILIPPI.

WHILE ON THE ROAD,
HE RAISED THIS QUESTION WITH THEM,
“WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?”

SO THEY TOLD HIM,
“JOHN THE BAPTIST’.”

“AND OTHERS, ‘ELIJAH’.”

“STILL OTHERS SAY, ‘ONE OF THE PROPHETS!’”

THEN, HE PUT THE QUESTION TO THEM,
“BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

PETER THE ROCK ANSWERED HIM,
“YOU ARE THE MESSIAH!”

AND JESUS URGED THEM TO SAY NOTHING OF THIS ABOUT HIM.
AND HE BEGAN TO TEACH THEM ABOUT THIS PROMISE:

“THE SON OF MAN, THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY,
MUST GO THROUGH TERRIBLE SUFFERING;
AND AFTER BEING DENOUNCED BY
THE POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, AND CORPORATE POWERS –
WILL BE PUT TO DEATH...
YET, AFTER THREE DAYS, RESURRECTED.”
AND HE SAID THIS TO THEM, PLAINLY.

THEN, PETER THE ROCK TOOK HOLD OF HIM AND TOLD HIM TO...
“SHUT UP!”

BUT TURNING AND SEEING THE DISCIPLES, HE SCORNEED PETER, SAYING,
“GET OUT OF MY WAY, YOU ENEMY OF GOD & HUMANITY!
YOU ARE CONCERNED, NOT FOR THE SAKE OF GOD,
BUT TO SAVE YOUR OWN SKIN!”

COMMANDING THE CROWD TO GATHER WITH THE DISCIPLES,
HE SAID TO THEM,

“IF ANY OF YOU DESIRE TO FOLLOW ME,
DESIRE TO REJECT YOUR SELFISH PREJUDICES,
DESIRE TO TAKE UP THE CROSS
OF YOUR OWN RESPONSIBILITIES,
THEN BY ALL MEANS FOLLOW ME!

FOR WHOEVER SEEKS TO SAVE THEIR LIFE,
WILL LOSE IT.

BUT THOSE WHO LOSE THEIR LIFE ON MY BEHALF –
AND THAT OF THE GOOD NEWS,
WILL SAVE IT!

[And Jesus said,]

“FOR WHAT ADVANTAGE IS IT TO A PERSON
WHO GAINS THE WHOLE WORLD, AND LOSES THEIR SOUL?
FOR WHAT CAN SOMEONE GIVE IN RETURN
FOR THEIR SOUL?

BUT IF ANYONE OF THIS TREACHEROUS AND LAWLESS GENERATION
IS ASHAMED OF ME AND OF WHAT I HAVE TO SAY,
OF THEM WILL THE SON OF MAN,
THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY, ALSO BE ASHAMED
WHEN THAT ONE COMES IN THE SPLENDOR
OF THE BELOVED GUARDIAN
AND THE MESSENGERS OF HOLINESS.”