

Jesus' boys come up with some pretty good answers when Jesus asks “*Who do people say I am?*” You’ve got John the Baptist recently creating a stir all over Judea, Elijah swept up to heaven in a divine whirlwind, or one of the prophets who were always around to say things against the current government. So it should not be strange or unexpected that debates continue even today about who Jesus Christ really is.

I can remember when a painting of Jesus that made him look like a hippie was considered a sacrilege. But have you seen the paintings of Jesus over the centuries? Or for that matter, have you heard the descriptions of Jesus from those eras gone by? They give a sense of what people, Christian and non-Christian, make of him. Look closely and I think they try to make Jesus one of us. In Victorian England Jesus was the perfect gentleman. In the United States in the 1920s Jesus was the American businessman. In the 1960s Jesus was the greatest salesman who ever lived. In the 1970s an artist drew a laughing Jesus, which is hanging in the lower hallway here at Ken Mawr.

In a lot of ways Jesus has become an inkblot test. People make him into whatever they see or whatever they want. We also assume that he affirms our personal views and values. He’s already been depicted as the perfect communist and the ideal capitalist—by communists and capitalists alike. We insecure humans seem to enjoy appointing Jesus as the prototype and defender of our way of life, whatever that may be. And while it’s easy to see what others try to turn Jesus into for their own purposes, it’s infinitely harder to recognize what we do to Jesus ourselves.

We generally like him to come in the size and shape that fits our own temperament, family configuration, and community. We preachers do it. If we’re unhappy people, we tend to preach harsh judgmental sermons. If we’re psychologically happy, we tend to preach hopeful optimistic sermons. No one sermon can fully and accurately depict who Jesus Christ truly is. Over the years, and I attribute this to my personal cynicism, when someone tells me I should read a certain writer or theologian—liberal or conservative—I ask this question: “Are they generally a forgiving Christian or a condemning Christian?” When someone tells me about a church in another denomination, or no denomination at all, I ask, “Are they faithful to Jesus’ teaching or are they more or less cultural Christians?”

These are my questions, and I confess they’re not perfect or even that helpful, but I believe that with every person there is always a perspective from which we see things. What I mean is that we need to acknowledge how as individuals and as denominations we put our own spin on who Jesus is. Nowadays in the U. S. a lot of people assume that Jesus affirms an ethic of non-judgmental niceness. If you were you here last Sunday when we looked at Mark 3 you might reconsider that. And when we look at Jesus dealing with the scribes and Pharisees he’s anything but non-judgmental, nor does he seem very nice to his mother and brothers when he leaves them waiting outside the door, or, as we read today, when he calls his best friend Peter “Satan.”

Peter walks into an illusion-crushing reality when he answers Jesus’ question “*Who do you say that I am?*” Now, he answers correctly: “*You are the Messiah.*” But soon after identifying Jesus as the Messiah, Peter and the others get a lecture from Jesus on true Messiahship that is nothing like their expectations. Then Peter begins to reprimand Jesus, probably as representative of the students at the top of the class, doing what everyone has done ever since Jesus came on the scene. His opinions of Jesus come from the expectations of his own cultural values. Peter thinks he’s throwing in with a winner. He no doubt expects

Jesus to declare himself the King—which of course is what a typical messiah would do—and raise a mighty army that kicks the Romans invaders out and then restore Israel’s nationhood.

Jesus, however, calls Peter “Satan” and tells him to get behind him. Aren’t followers supposed to be behind the leader, not pushing ahead of them anyway? Peter is setting his mind on things that Satan already tempted Jesus with. If Jesus is the Messiah he could hand out baskets of government surplus food to everyone and then appoint his friends to high places in his administration. He could impress the crowds with miracles so they would follow him anywhere. Instead, Jesus gives the first prediction that he “*must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again*” (v. 31). This is the hinge on which all of Mark’s gospel, and all of salvation, depends. We depend on it.

Even now, when we say who we think Jesus is, we might verbalize the right words as Peter did, but Jesus informs us we’re using the wrong definitions. Jesus goes on to explain what he means by the word “Messiah” and “Son of Man.” He will suffer and die. He had already faced the devil’s temptation to be the top of the heap, the ladder climber with the best house and the flashy new import car, the guy who takes his family on the most exotic vacations and who has mostly celebrities for friends.

Have you noticed how in this country and culture we’re constantly pushed to put our energies into self-promotion and self-enhancement? We’re tempted by greed and narcissism, sometimes with a promise from Satan that what we do for ourselves helps others in the end. But it’s really playing the child’s game of whoever has the most toys wins.

We have to ask ourselves: Is that all that we are? Collectors of trinkets? Spenders of money? Consumers of products? Or are we Christ’s followers, valuable to God, sought by God, claimed by God through Christ the Messiah? Paul the Apostle says, “*You are not your own. You were bought with a price.*” What Paul figured out is that if Jesus’ life was one of serving God and serving others, so should ours be. If Jesus suffered, so will his followers, contrary to promises we sometimes hear from TV preachers telling us that only comfort and endless blessings await followers of Jesus.

Jesus says if we want to be his disciples we must, “*Deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him*” (v. 35). That could mean, and I’m just guessing here, choosing not to buy the latest and greatest electronic device on the market, or the latest and greatest vehicle, or the latest and greatest consumer product of whatever shape, size or price tag. Jesus seems to be saying that a life of serving and suffering is not only the right thing to choose, but the only kind of life that God honors in the resurrection. Short of the resurrection it’s also, by the way, the only kind of life that brings us satisfaction.

When they were both alive I remember reading about the differences between two world figures—Princess Diana and Mother Teresa. The news quoted Diana as saying that she was never really happy. Mother Teresa, however, was always joyful. The wealth and opulence around Diana didn’t free her to be happy, even though she tried to serve others. The Spirit of Christ inside Mother Teresa granted her the joy of service. Jesus asks his disciples, and us, “*What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*” (Mark 8:36) We’re created to trust in God, to love others, and to forget about ourselves. Jesus says that we must *lose our lives to save them*, which interestingly is Jesus’ teaching that is preserved in the four Gospels more than anything else.

It’s the direct opposite of what our culture teaches: to grab all you can for yourself. When Jesus has this exchange with Peter and the others, he is headed to Jerusalem to die. He says it “must” be. He’s not

gloomy about it, he's resolved to give his life for others—willingly. He's determined to suffer for us—of his own choosing. We too will suffer. We already suffer with and for those we love, and as Jesus taught us and showed us, love is the central reason for our existence—something we give. Our Christian life isn't a cost-benefit analysis. It's one of all-out trusting in God and loving others. That is the Jesus kind of life.

Who is Jesus Christ? As far as we can tell, Jesus asks this question about himself only this one time. In Mark's gospel, it comes smack dab in the literary and theological center of the book, the hinge of the story. Opinions about him were being formed in the large crowds dogging his every step and within his inner circle of friends. So he asks, "*Who do people say I am?*" But he doesn't stop there. His next question is the real clincher: "*Who do you say I am?*"

Although Peter and the disciples have it right—Jesus is indeed the Messiah—they still want to dictate the definition of the term. They want to follow Jesus, they really do. But here Jesus seems intent on taking a path in the opposite direction of where they want to go. Jesus knew that to be the Messiah (a Hebrew term meaning the anointed one; Christ in the Greek language) was to suffer and die, to take on the sorrows of the world so as to unmake them from the inside out. That's why Peter rebukes Jesus for his negative talk. "You won't win any political campaigns with that kind of talk, Master." Well, of course not. Jesus had come to reveal a kingdom that would come only through sacrifice and love, through suffering and death, through service and humility.

As we ponder the choices Jesus made, we also wonder what that means for us. Can we align our confession that Jesus is the Messiah with a willingness to follow Jesus down paths of service and humility? At this time of year I think of our Deacons who selflessly serve the body of Christ by preparing for and cleaning up after one of our Lenten Dinners. And I'm aware of dozens of Ken Mawr members who have walked with neighbors and friends through times of heartbreaking grief. In service and humility we discover the good news that Jesus knows the deepest hurts of our lives. He is aware of what gives us confidence so we can sleep; and he knows what causes us anxieties when we have trouble sleeping. Jesus knows the people we think we are better than; and Jesus senses those times we fear that we are worse than everyone else.

His words at this time of his life are serious words, heavy words. They cannot be dismissed or brushed aside. Consider one little word in verse 27 that I believe can sum up the whole passage. It is the Greek word *ὁδῶ* [just 3 Greek letters: omicron, delta, omega] translated "*way*" in the NIV. The literal meaning of the word *ὁδῶ* is "a path, or a road." But that's not all it means. It's a word that Mark uses in his gospel to indicate not only that Jesus and his disciples are on their way to the region of Caesarea Philippi, which they are, but additionally they have become part of "*a way of life*" with Jesus.

Even though Mark mentioned opposition to Jesus before, from this point on, at this hinge point of the story, Jesus' ministry becomes "the way of the Cross." We will need courage, humility, gentleness and discipline to follow Jesus the Messiah. He calls us to follow HIS WAY—not the way of success, or the way of prosperity, or the way of glory, but the Way of the Cross, as our Lord Jesus did. Amen.