

The Divine Point of View
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September 13, 2015

Mark 8.27-38

27 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?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

OUR POINT OF VIEW

Our point of view, our particular perspective affects how we see another person.

For example, if you are a Democrat often you will evaluate candidates for office much differently than a Republican. You have a different point of view, a different set of expectations of those who seek public office.

Our point of view also affects our faith.
For example, take our question for today.

Who is Jesus?

How we answer that question depends upon our point of view. And amazingly, after all these years, Christians still don't agree on that question.

It all depends on our point of view.

Several years ago our adult Sunday School class studied Philip Yancey's book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*.

The thesis of that book was that our opinions about Jesus and the kingdom of God are often influenced by culture and tradition more than what the gospels actually say about Jesus.

Yancey noted that the portraits of Jesus in many Sunday School rooms depict a blonde haired, blue-eyed man. Jesus was a dark skinned Jewish man. We know that, but we still hold on to those portraits that make Jesus look like us.

And his contention was that we not only do that with the portraits of Jesus that we display but also in what we say about Jesus.

Often what we say about Jesus just doesn't match up with the clear message of the gospels. The Jesus of the Bible is a stranger to us. We never know him because we insist on looking at him through the lens of our own experience and the culture in which we live.

THE JESUS THEY DIDN'T KNOW

Unlike the disciples we have known the truth about Jesus from the very beginning. In the very first verse Mark tells us that Jesus is the "Son of God."

But, as we read Mark's story we soon learn that almost everyone else doesn't know that. When Jesus heals the sick or stills the storm, people are flabbergasted.

Who is this guy? What does this mean? Where does he get this knowledge and power?

No one has any answers, including Jesus' own disciples and the religious leaders.

In fact it seems like the only ones who really have a clue about the identity of Jesus are the demons that he expels. And Jesus makes them hush up about it!

This theme continues throughout the first seven chapters of Mark. There is mystery and confusion surrounding the identity of Jesus.

But, today's lesson is a turning point.
The identity of Jesus is revealed.

WHO DO THE PEOPLE SAY I AM?

It all begins as Jesus asks his disciples on the way to Caesarea Philippi,

"Who do people say that I am?"

I've often wondered why Jesus asked his disciples that question.

Jesus was not like modern day politicians.
He certainly didn't make changes in his ministry after consulting the results of the latest focus group. In fact Jesus often did things that were contrary to public opinion.

Sometimes when Jesus preached people were amazed.
Sometimes when Jesus preached they were confused.

And sometimes when Jesus preached folks got so mad at what he said that they wanted to throw him off a cliff!

It was obvious that Jesus didn't cater to the whims of public opinion.

And yet he wanted the disciples to tell him what the people were saying about him.

Why did he ask that question?

I think that Jesus did not ask this question in order to discover what people were saying.
He already knew.

Instead, he asked this question for the benefit of the disciples.
He wanted them to bring out into the open the misconceptions that swirled around his ministry.

The disciples had definitely been listening to what others had been saying about Jesus. They quickly gave Jesus a report on what the focus groups were saying.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Some said that he was John the Baptist.

You'll remember that this was Herod's theory.
Herod felt guilty because he killed the popular prophet.

And when Herod heard about the mighty things that Jesus was doing,
Herod thought,

"Oh no. He's back.
And he's stronger than ever."

Some picked up on that theme and the rumor about Jesus began to spread.

They said that the spirit of John the Baptist now resided in Jesus.

ELIJAH OR A PROPHET

Others thought that Jesus was Elijah.

According to tradition, Elijah would return from heaven and herald the coming of the Messiah.

We can understand why some may have thought this.

Like Elijah, Jesus boldly challenged the political and religious leaders, and he backed up his teaching with acts of power and grace.

And even if Jesus wasn't Elijah or the spirit of John the Baptist, he was at the very least a great prophet.

That's what others said.

MORE THAN A PROPHET

But, the speculation of the crowd was wrong.

Jesus was more than a prophet.

Jesus was more than a great teacher.

He was the Son of God, the Word made flesh.

Whether we know it or not, we are all affected by the opinions of those around us.

When we answer the, "Who is Jesus?" question, part of our answer will often be influenced by what other people say about Jesus.

There are many today who speak of Jesus as a great prophet or a great teacher.

And he was.

But, we believe more than that.

We believe Jesus was the Savior, the Son of the living God.

And in order to follow Jesus we have to confess that faith for ourselves.

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

We see this call to commitment in the next verse.

After asking the disciples to say what the people believed about Jesus, He then asked them a more personal question.

“Who do you say that I am?”

This is the essence of faith.
It is personal.

What do we say about Jesus?

Others may say that Jesus was a great prophet.
Others may say that Jesus was a great teacher.
And many now say (as was the case with some of the religious authorities) that he was the devil incarnate.

But, what others say is not the most important point.
There comes a time when we must decide for ourselves about Jesus.

Who do we say that he is?

YOU ARE THE MESSIAH

Peter, speaking for the other disciples had an answer.
He said, “You are the Messiah.”

Peter said what others had been thinking all along but were afraid to say out loud.

You see, in those days when the people talked about the Messiah, they talked about a person who would be a political and military hero as well as a person of great faith. The Messiah would defeat the enemies of Israel, restore the Temple and reign as king for all eternity.

In other words, heaven would come to earth in the person of the Messiah and take over.

The Romans didn't know much Jewish theology, but they knew about the Messiah. And they were on the lookout for anyone who might claim to be the Messiah.

That's why the people were reluctant to call Jesus the Messiah. The people may have thought that Jesus was acting like a Messiah.

But, they didn't say it out loud.
That could get you crucified.

But, of course Peter was not the kind of guy who was known for his careful speech!

Answering, I think, for all the other disciples Peter said, "You are the Messiah."

SON OF MAN

In Matthew's gospel Peter is praised for his insight.
But, in Mark's gospel there is no praise for Peter.
Instead, Jesus sternly orders the disciples not to tell anyone about him.

Once again we're back to that Messianic secret motif.

"Who do you say that I am?"
"You're the Messiah."
"Don't you dare tell anyone."

I wonder if Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone because he was rejecting the title of Messiah, or at the very least the popular conception of what it meant to be a Messiah.

In the very next verse Jesus describes the true nature of his ministry.
And in doing so he refers to himself using a different title, the Son of Man.

The Son of Man will not be a conquering hero whose reign will last forever.
Instead, he will suffer and lay down his life for the sake of the people he loves.

What kind of Messiah is this?

Well, maybe this is not a Messiah at all.
Maybe this is the Son of Man and the Son of God.
Maybe this is the one who gives us a human glimpse into the heart of God.

And its not like anything we expected.

Jesus is not a prophet of power or a military Messiah.
He is the suffering servant.

REBUKE

Peter does not recognize this Jesus.
And so Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him.

You see, Peter has a theology of glory.
He believes in the power of positive thinking.
He believes that might makes right.
He doesn't recognize this Jesus who talks about suffering and a cross.

But, Jesus turns his back on Peter.
And more than that, Jesus calls him "Satan".

The words are reminiscent of the Temptation.

Satan offers Jesus the world if only he will worship the devil. In other words Jesus can gain the world if he accepts the ways of the world, the ways of power and military might.

Jesus of course rejects that offer and turns his back on the evil one. In the same way Jesus turns his back on Peter and openly says something that Peter (and probably the other disciples) would love to keep hush, hush.

The problem, according to Jesus is that Peter is setting his mind on human things instead of divine things.

THE DIVINE POINT OF VIEW

What is Jesus talking about?
What is the human point of view? What is the divine point of view?

The human point of view is defined by self-interest.
According to this viewpoint, life is all about us.
The ultimate goal of life is getting what we want.

On the other hand, Jesus models the divine point of view.
It's all about the way of the cross.
Following Jesus is a path that leads to self-denial.

THE CROSS DEFINED

We might think that this leads to a grim unfulfilling life.
How many people have said with an air of resignation and repressed anger,

“Oh, this is just the cross that I have to bear?”

They might be bearing some cross, but they are not bearing the cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ is voluntarily assuming a burden, doing some act of service for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Oddly enough, when we seek to hold on to life, it slips through our fingers.

But, when we give our life away for the sake of God's kingdom, we find out what it means to really live.

The gospels make this point over and over again.

Those who seek to save their life will lose it.

But, those who give up their life for the sake of the gospel will find it.

SERVING TO LIVE

Several nights ago I watched the On the Road segment of the CBS nightly news. They told the story of a woman named Ethel who ran a small candy store in the city.

Ethel is now 101 years old, and she began running that store with her husband toward the end of the Great Depression.

They sold toys and candy to the nearby school, and now she sells candy and toys to the great grandchildren of those first customers.

Ethel used to have the children make change from their purchases as a way to help them with their math skills. But, she admits that now she relies upon the children making change because her memory is not so good.

The children who frequent her shop were interviewed and they all love her.

One boy said, "We think of her as our friend."

The journalist asked Ethel the obvious question,
"Why do you keep on doing this?
You could have retired years ago."

And she replied,
"Working with children keeps me young.
I don't think that I could have made it to 101 if I didn't do this."

Ethel does her job because its what she loves to do it.
It has meaning for her.
Serving others even in a simple way gives her life.

LIFE THROUGH SERVICE

And this is even more true when we serve in the name of Jesus. When we find a way to serve others in the name of Jesus, we find life.

We find meaningful life.

The cross that Jesus bids us take up is the cross of self denial. We simply choose to serve others for the sake of God's kingdom.

And through that service we are saved.

That's the divine point of view as revealed by Jesus.

Life is not about getting.
Life is about giving.

GRATITUDE

It's important to understand why we serve.

We don't serve out of a sense of guilt.
 We don't serve because we think that if we don't do enough God won't love us.

The gospel tells us that God already loves us.
 In Jesus we are forgiven.
 He died for our sins on the cross.

And that fact frees us to serve out of a sense of gratitude.

I think gratitude is the most powerful motivator in the world.
 Our stewardship campaign this year is entitled, "Giving with Gratitude."

I think that's great.
 It's why we give.
 It's why we serve.

This divine point of view is achieved by climbing a high mountain called "grace". And when we catch that gracious vision, life is abundant. When we catch that gracious vision life is eternal.

LIFE VIEWED FROM A MOUNTAINTOP

In one of the churches I served there was an elderly woman who was very wise and content. She was popular with many young people as an advisor and a friend.

Her favorite expression was, "I view life from a mountaintop."

In other words, when she looked back on her long life, she thought about how God had been gracious to her and that gave her hope for the future. She was a living example of a line from that popular hymn, Amazing Grace.

She trusted that grace had brought her "safe thus far" and grace would lead her home.

This perspective made her someone that you wanted to be around. A life lived from a divine point of view is an attractive life.

It is a life that enlivens others. And it is the life that we are called to live.

CHANGING OUR POINT OF VIEW

So what's your point of view when it comes to life?
Is your life consumed with just one thing after another?

Or do you see in the activities of the day the grace of God?

I would invite you to look at things from the divine point of view.

That's why Jesus came.

He came to help the "blind" see.
He came to open our eyes to the true nature of life.
He came to give us that divine perspective.

And so today Jesus invites us as he invited disciples long ago:

"Take up your cross and follow me.
Climb with me a hill called Golgotha.

But, don't be afraid.
On the way you will learn what it means to really live.

That grim hill of self-sacrifice will become a high mountain called grace.
And from that perspective you will truly be able to see forever.

You will have a divine point of view."

Amen.