

Lectionary 24 + September 16, 2018

“Who do you say that I am?” It’s a great question asked by Jesus and there are a number of ways we can answer him. Jesus is a great prophet, lover of the poor, wise teacher, healer, visionary, friend of sinners, one who casts out demons, practitioner of mercy and so much more. All of these things are true.

I imagine, too, that Jesus may be used to support any number of beliefs or ideologies reflective of the spiritual diversity of our culture, ranging from the super religious to those who say, “I’m spiritual, not religious.” But the more important question for us gathered here this morning remains: “Who do *you* say that I am?”

Jesus directs that question to you and to me and all the baptized.

Though popular opinion is far and wide, Jesus seems especially concerned about what the church says about who he is because we have this task of representing Jesus to the world. Along with Peter we know what to say. Without missing a beat, Peter says, “You are the Messiah!” We know it’s the right answer but what kind of answer is it?

Jesus breaks open the meaning for us and he says it rather plainly to Peter and the rest: The Messiah must suffer and die and three days later be raised.

Does it still surprise you? We know that Jesus’ death and resurrection are at the heart of the Gospels but it still comes as surprise that the Messiah, that is, God’s chosen one, anointed by God to do God’s work should exercise power in such a way. Suffer and die? That’s a rather upside down notion of leadership. Is this any way for the Messiah to act? Like Peter, does it still, at times, offend you? Suffering and death just doesn’t sound like a winning strategy. We thought the Messiah was to come and defeat the powers of the world but instead, he suffers at the hands of the world’s powers.

It’s a little crazy. We understand why Peter disapproves. He doesn’t like it one bit but Jesus is quick to point out to Peter that he has successfully set his mind not on divine things, not on the things of God, but on human things. What Jesus calls divine things are rooted in God’s passionate love while what Jesus calls the “human things” are void of mercy and love.

It’s quite a contrast ...

- we want a strong God who will kick our enemies to pieces but his Messiah confounds us with a command to love our enemies
- we want a Messiah who will bless our prosperity but this Messiah blesses the poor
- we want a Messiah who will be there to supply every one of my needs but this Messiah says it’s foolish to store up treasures, teaching us not to get, but to give
- we want a Savior who will fight and win, not suffer and die
- we want God to fix things, not just be there with us in the messiness of life
- we prefer God at a distance, not one who will get down and wash our feet

“Who do you say I am?” asks Jesus and however we answer the question we cannot get around the fact that this Messiah has come among us not to be served but to serve and to give his life away.

When Jesus chastises Peter for setting his mind on human rather than divine things, I think Jesus is pointing to two very different notions of power.

Yes, the reign of God is filled with forgiveness of sins, fear is relinquished, and love rules but none of these things comes through raw power but rather through the power of God’s love that that does not look like power at all. Call it mercy. God does not coerce us or manipulate us. Jesus isn’t all that interested in winning arguments or building empires.

Jesus acts in love and desires nothing more than this – that we trust him.

We know something of both paths of power. I think they vie for our attention in our hearts. What Jesus calls “human things” is a means of ascent and the desire to cling to the power of certainty and control but God’s power calls us to give up on all that. Instead of using violence or coercion, Jesus’ call is to the way of mercy but don’t mistake that for being as a door mat. Jesus calls us to live truthfully and exercise courage but to do so in love for that is the stuff of “things divine” and it is the real power that changes the world.

What can it mean for us to take up our cross and follow this Messiah – to embrace this power?

Well, there is no formula. The Christian life is rarely neat or tidy but God has given us practices so that the journey of following Jesus will be nourished and deepened - the Eucharist, prayer, scripture, signs of mercy and Christian community and in these practices and from these practices we are formed by God’s hand to be shaped by the power of God that looks radically different than the powers that make headline news.

Let me explore a couple of these practices with you.

One has been on my mind because Vicar Elizabeth spoke about it in her sermon last Sunday. She encouraged us to look around at our sisters and brothers when we gather at the Table for the communion meal. It’s a wonderful practice and one that is guaranteed to fill your heart and mind with all kinds of thoughts and feelings. A practice like this helps us embrace the unique power of God. We know the tired old power games where love of neighbor gets short shrift because in a world of fear and anxiety we look to others with suspicion or we create hierarchies and categories of “we” and “them.”

To ponder, in gratitude, the presence of sisters and brothers gathered around the table not only reminds us that communion is much more than a private deal. It is our common-union with Christ and others with whom we share a common loaf and cup. I see a practice like that helping us to see again the miracle of God’s transforming power where distinctions of child and adult, young and old, white and brown, woman and man, rich and poor disappear.

Such a practice around the table surely lead to how we view others around our tables at home

or at work or with our neighbors where we are free to jettison the distinctions we enjoy making in our typical “power games,” opting instead for God’s preference of honoring everyone.

I think that is what the lesson from James is getting at. When we use our tongue to put down others or engage in all out gossip we create a kind of blazing forest fire. We use speech to hurt each other and we end up hurting ourselves. James says we don’t have to speak that way. We can reject that kind of destructive power and become practitioners of God’s unique power. We can lift each other up instead of tearing each other down and engage in truthful speech.

For me, this last week, one way the power of gathering at the table of Jesus translated into gathering around another table was Tuesday night at our council meeting. Since folks brand new to the council were there, we reviewed the way the PRLC council makes decisions through consensus.

We do not have up and down votes of yes or no. We don’t vote at all but seek consensus from all and sure enough we did and the experience was one where everyone gets to listen and everyone gets a chance to speak. Both the unity and diversity that Christ gives us around the table was reflected in that table on Tuesday evening and such practices may be especially honoring of those whose lives are marked by a feeling or sense of powerlessness.

Then, later in the week, I was at another table sharing a meal with a friend who cared enough to tell me the truth about something that was on his heart and mind that could have been one of those lingering and festering hurts or frustrations, but by getting it out in the open and talking and listening to one another, we could be clear and honest and move forward in a spirit of mutual love.

I wonder what examples you have. I wonder what other ways God gives us to practice the way of Jesus.

In one of his books, the late Henri Nouwen presented a contemporary rendition of a story he gleaned from ancient Christian wisdom. He called it the story of the brick.

One day John said to Sandy: “We have never had an argument. Let’s have an argument like other people have.” Sandy asked: “But how can we start an argument?” John answered her, “It’s very simple. I take a brick and say ‘it is mine’ and then you say ‘no, it is mine.’ and then we have an argument.” So they sat down and John took a brick. “This brick is mine,” he declared. Sandy looked at him gently and said: “Well, of course it is yours. Take it.” And they could not have an argument.

Nouwen concluded that as long as we have bricks in our hands and speak of what is “mine” and “yours,” we continue to play power games but if we dare to let go of the bricks and empty our hands and raise them to God then we are free: free to receive God’s power from the one whose reign is shaped in the sign of a cross, quietly changing the world through mercy and love.

I guess that’s something of what Jesus means when he says, “If you want to follow me, lose your life to really find it.” Amen.