

“Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today?”

Mark 8:27-38

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 12) 2021

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What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who is Jesus Christ for us today.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, April 30, 1944, *Letters from Prison*

Saying yes, to the person of Christ, which remains isolated from the way of Christ in this world, is Satanic. It is evil. It is seductive. It cannot be the Christian faith.

- Eberhard Bethge, 1995 sermon

On April 30, 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his best friend Eberhard Bethge. Bonhoeffer, age 39, with less than a year to live, was in a Gestapo prison in Berlin. He wrote to his friend, “What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who is Jesus Christ for us today.”

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? That was Bonhoeffer’s question in 1944 and it was essentially the question he wrestled with his entire adult life. For Bonhoeffer, the centrality of Jesus Christ was at the heart of everything he did and believed, and the living Christ must be at the heart of everything the church is called to be. Without the living Jesus Christ, there is no church, there is no Christianity, and there is no hope. Christianity becomes abstract, a set of principles, a myth. Only with Jesus Christ central, can Christianity be embodied, a life, incarnate.

It was Bonhoeffer's clarity about the centrality of Christ which gave him the ability to see the evils of Hitler and Nazism when everyone else in Germany, and especially the German church, saw Hitler as the God-anointed leader and savior of their nation. Through Jesus Christ Bonhoeffer could see when everyone else was blind; furthermore, it was the living Christ who gave Bonhoeffer the ability to resist Hitler and Nazism and gave him the insight and strength to speak out for Jews, when almost no one else did.

The Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians, "Be strong in the Lord, and in power of his might. I say to you, 'stand!'" That is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer was able to do and that is exactly what I want us to be able to do.

Mark says that Jesus was in the villages around Caesarea Phillipi. Caesarea Phillipi was located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee in the foothills of Mt. Hermon. Presently, the ruins of Caesarea Phillipi are near the village of Banyas in what we now call the Golan Heights. It used to be Syrian but is now controlled by Israel and will not likely be returned to Syria willingly because the Golan is the source of most of Israel's water. Caesarea Phillipi and present day Banyas are located near the headwaters of the Jordan River which emerges from a series of springs at the foot of Mt. Hermon.

Banyas, a modern Arabic name which comes from the ancient word Pania, was an area named for the Greco-Roman god Pan who was worshiped in the region. When one of Herod the Great's sons, Herod Phillip became king of this northern region, he built a Roman city named for himself and Caesar, which

featured temples built to various pagan gods, especially Pan. It was built on the side of the mountain with alcoves and temples carved into the stone for the various gods. As you walked along the streams of waters coming from the springs, you passed the temples of multiple gods to worship. It was most likely in this area that Jesus is walking with his disciples.

Jesus looks around at all the pagan statues and temples and says, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples answer with the names of various biblical prophets. Then Jesus stops, turns, and looks directly at his disciples, “What about you? Who do you say that I am?”

Peter spoke up, “You’re the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed and Chosen One of God.”

In Matthew’s version of this story, Jesus commends Peter and tells him that such faith is the rock upon which the church shall be built. Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree that Jesus went on and explained that being the Messiah is the way suffering and death, and furthermore, that he was going to die on a cross.

Peter interrupted him, “No, Lord! You’re not going to suffer and die! Don’t even talk about it!”

Jesus quickly turned, “Satan, shut up and get out of here! Peter, you don’t know what you’re talking about! You have no idea of how God works.”

Jesus then motions for the crowd which had gathered around to draw closer,

“If any want to become my followers, they must deny themselves, and take up the cross and follow me. If you want to protect yourself, and you want safety and security, power, and control, then you’ll end up destroying yourself. If you truly want to save yourself, you will need to give yourself away.”

Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” while standing in the region dedicated to pagan gods and named for the Roman emperor who was already being worshiped as a god. Peter responds with his “great confession” that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed and Chosen One of God.”

But when Peter refuses to acknowledge that to confess Jesus as the Christ also means participating in the Way of Jesus – the Way of suffering servanthood and the Cross, Jesus then rebukes Peter, saying that Peter is participating in Evil. He is satanic, even.

Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s best friend, and the recipient of Bonhoeffer’s 1944 letter asking, “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” fifty years later preached a sermon on this same text. Bethge, said, “You cannot have the name of Christ, you cannot be called a Christian, without His way.” Bethge explained, that Peter wants to separate the person of Jesus, from the Way of Jesus. He goes on, “So Scripture says here, saying yes, to the person of Christ, which remains isolated from the Way of Christ in this world, is Satanic. It is evil. It is seductive. It cannot be Christian faith” (Bethge, April 23, 1995, in *Sermons from Duke Chapel*, ed. Will Willimon, p. 319-320).

Bethge put his finger right on the hard truth: To know Jesus Christ we must

participate in the suffering servanthood of Christ. To confess Christ, no matter how loudly and vociferously, without entering the suffering servanthood of Christ is evil! It is satanic.

Again Bonhoeffer: “The church is only the church when it exists for others.” In another place he said, “We have to learn to see from below – from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled, in short from the perspective of those who suffer.” (*Ethics*, p. 137).

Peter wanted a triumphant and powerful Jesus and Jesus said that to want that was evil, satanic. In Bonhoeffer and Bethge’s time, Christians in Germany believed that they could believe deeply and ardently in Jesus in their hearts but never speak out and suffer alongside the Jews and others who suffered. During the Crusades of the 11th and 12th century, European soldiers would shout, “Jesus is Lord!” while cutting off the heads of their Muslim opponents. In our own United States, slaveowners could believe deeply in Jesus in their hearts and see no incongruity. Today, we have our own ardent so-called Christians who believe in and proclaim a powerful and even violent Jesus, but never do a thing that Jesus says.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

We can talk the talk, but if we’re not walking the walk, then we can be instruments of evil. To confess Christ as Lord means suffering with Jesus.

Otherwise, to confess Christ isolated from discipleship and suffering is evil. Without participating in suffering servanthood – the way of discipleship – confessing Christ can become triumphant, about power, even violence. Evil.

I've told this story before, but it has been a while and it bears telling again. Clarence Jordan went to his brother Bob, a lawyer, asking for legal help for Koinonia Farm in Georgia in the mid-1950's. Bob had a bright future in Georgia politics and later became a state senator and a justice on the Georgia Supreme Court. Clarence asked Bob for help.

Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job or my house, everything I've got.

We might lose everything, too, Bob, replied Clarence—and it was true. Koinonia had been under the threat of violence, drive by shootings into the houses in the cloak of night, a firebombing of their roadside vegetable stand.

It's different for you, said his brother.

Why is it different? Clarence asked him. I remember you and I walked down the aisle of the Baptist church on the same Sunday when we were boys, and the preacher asked me the same question he asked you, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' and I said, yes. What did you say?

I follow Jesus up to a point, Robert said.

Could that point by any chance be—the cross? said Clarence.

That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified, Robert told him.

Then I don't believe you're a disciple, said Clarence. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to and tell them you're an admirer not a disciple.

Well now, his brother said, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't have a church, would we?

*The question, Clarence said, is, 'Do you have a church?' (James McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, p.127-128).*

To know Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior, includes following him as a disciple. We walk with Jesus, serve with Jesus, learn to act like Jesus, and we are with Jesus among the outcasts, the least, the left-out, and the ground-down. We work with, have compassion, empathize, and exhaust ourselves on behalf of others, praying that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Living Christ, will renew us. Otherwise, we don't know Jesus and we easily become instruments of evil.

Now, there are all kinds of suffering going on in us, among us, around us, and in this world. What is Jesus talking about when he speaks of the Way of the cross and suffering?

Some suffering comes to us because we are human beings on this broken planet. Some of you have heard that I received a diagnosis of kidney cancer this week. It was unexpected and Jane, the girls, and I have been in shock. We're looking at surgery at a yet to be determined date.

Where is Jesus in this? While I do believe in curing and healing and believe that any and all healing that comes, in whatever form, is the work of God, I also do not believe that God protects us from suffering. I believe that God in Jesus Christ, enters into our suffering and walks with us, suffers with us, and gives us comfort and healing comes – not necessarily curing – but healing comes as we learn to offer up our suffering to the living God in Christ, whose outstretched arms on the cross embraces all our suffering.

The prophet Isaiah said, “By his stripes we are healed” (Is. 53:5). In and through Christ's wounds on the cross, we find our very healing.

Partly this means, when we share our suffering with one another in Christ, we are sharing it with Christ.

Among the many words of encouragement and prayer I've received, Deacon Cindy Bertin said back to me part of my own benediction said every Sunday, “Hold on tight, because we're going to need each other...” It is Christ who enables us to hold on. The Apostle Paul tells the Colossians, “In him [Christ] all things hold together” (Col. 1:17), and that includes us, Austin Heights Baptist Church.

One morning this week, I was home trying to read, and our Church

Administrator, Denise called in a shaky voice explaining that her daughter Grace, who is 7 months pregnant, was driving here in town and hit a bad patch of road that blew out her front two tires. Grace had called, upset, and Denise needed to leave the office and go check on her, and give her a ride. I quickly said, “Of course!” Then I said, “Denise, take a deep breath. It’s going to be okay.” She responded, “I need to be the one saying that to you.” And I realized, and said, “These days we’re all going to be saying this to one another.”

We’re in strange, hard times, and part of our discipleship of following Jesus, is to take a deep breath – remembering that we are breathing in the Holy Spirit – and then trusting that all will be well (Julian of Norwich). That does not mean, all will be tranquil. It does not mean that all will be like it used to be, but it does mean that we can trust God, trust God’s people (each other) to be with us and walk us through it all.

Let me mention quickly that there is another kind of suffering in which we enter when we follow Jesus as disciples. It is the suffering that results from doing Christ-like work – serving the least and the left-out, refusing to be bystanders when we see injustice and evil around us. Some suffering comes just by being human – cancer, health issues, grief, etc. – and some comes because we do the right thing, the Jesus-like thing. And in our Scripture lesson this morning, it is this latter kind of suffering of which Jesus is speaking. When we try to confess Jesus is Lord, without entering his suffering-servanthood discipleship, we can easily become evil. We end up turning Jesus into our own image, instead of allowing Jesus to make us into his image.

So, who is Jesus Christ for us today?

Well, I'll tell you who he is for me.

There is so much I don't know. And there is much that overwhelms us – cancer to Covid to climate change and more. As the writer of Hebrews says, “There is much that is in chaos and turmoil, but we do see Jesus” (Heb. 2:8-9).

He is the Lord who suffers on the cross because he embodied and proclaimed God's Way of justice, peace, and grace. Jesus is the Christ who heals from the cross, who redeems and makes whole from the cross. And this same Jesus is the wounded one whom God resurrected and who shows us the Way to God and the Way of God is suffering servanthood, mercy, and love.

Some years ago, old baptist radical Will Campbell was with a bunch of clergy. As is often the case, when together clergy tend to gripe and whine, and this time was no different. All the various problems in our world, and the various failings of the church were rehearsed over and over. Finally, Will spoke up, cutting through it all, “The way I see it, life is a horse race, and I'm betting on Jesus.”

Well, I'm with Will: I'm betting on Jesus. He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed and Chosen One of God!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.