



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 17 – Proper 19 (B)

Who Is He?

[RCL] Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-8; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Jesus presents the disciples and, consequently, all of us with two important questions. First, the question of popular opinion: “Who do people say that I am?” That one is easy: “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” One learns from the disciples’ response that, when it comes to Jesus, popular opinion is all over the place. And it’s no different today.

A church group in 2018 posed the question, “Who do people say Jesus is?” to a number of people in Union Square, a popular hangout location in New York City. The opinions were all over the map, from that of a good moral teacher to that of a prophet. Some even surmised that Jesus was a misunderstood space angel. Jesus follows up the question of popular opinion with a second question, a personal question. In fact, this is the most critical question ever asked, because within one’s answer lies the difference between unbelief and faith, and ultimately, the difference between death and life. Jesus asks, “Who do *you* say that I am?”

St. Peter delivers the correct answer: “You are the Messiah.” But in Peter’s mind, the Messiah meant a military king who, through a holy war, would reestablish the Davidic Kingdom of Israel. In fact, Jesus knew this was the popular opinion and hence sternly ordered them to tell no one. This requires Jesus to teach the disciples what the scriptures actually say about the Messiah. Indeed, the Messiah is the Son of David, the King of Israel, and yet this king “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.”

Jesus’ description doesn’t fit Peter’s profile – or anyone’s profile – of what the Messiah should be, so Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Imagine that. The idea being conveyed in Greek with the word *rebuke* is the same way a mother would speak to an obstinate child: “I have had enough of that sort of talk. Stop this nonsense! Jesus, this is not how Messiahs are supposed to act.” Then, Jesus rebukes Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

This is the first point: we are just like Peter. We can confess Jesus as the Messiah in one breath, and deny him in the next. One minute, our minds are attaining the heights of heaven, and the next minute, we can be as worldly as it gets. What we learn from Peter is the Christian life as it *actually is*. Recognizing that, like Peter, the confessor and the denier are one and the same.

And now the question becomes: What is at the root of Peter's denial? What is at the root of *our* denial? One might argue it is the content of Jesus' call: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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."

Everyone in the first century knew what Jesus was talking about when he called them to take up their cross and follow him, and no one in the first century would have found it a great idea. They all understood what the great 20th-century martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, would write in his famous work, "The Cost of Discipleship": "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." The root of our denial is the same as Peter's; ultimately, the call to follow Jesus means to die, and if we are honest, we don't want to die. In fact, we are desperately trying to save ourselves.

Some philosophers have broken down human existence and meaning into three primary categories: work, recreation, and religion. All three of these categories in our hands can become means by which we try to save ourselves. We can save our lives by immersing ourselves in work. We will become successful and fulfilled and then we will be happy. We can save our lives by immersing ourselves in recreation. We will be rested, understand fine wines, and then we will be happy.

Religion is notorious for being a means to save ourselves. Quit doing this, stop doing that, consult this, be that, and God will finally be pleased with us and then we will be happy. It is interesting that Jesus gives this teaching in the midst of all of the pagan temples where people are making various sacrifices in order to appease the gods and save themselves.

This is the second point: Like Peter, we are fine with a Messiah, minus the dying and rising for our salvation. We want a Messiah minus the cross because, ultimately, we want to save our own lives. The cross testifies that humanity's wound and offense are great, and they need to be atoned for. Yet the cross also testifies that God's grace is greater and that, through Jesus' death, God freely and ultimately destroys *our* death to give us the gift of eternal life.

So, what does it practically look like to take up your cross and follow Jesus? This means that real life has nothing to do with blessing in human terms and everything to do with loss. Jesus on the cross - rejected, suffering, and dying - proclaims to us that God is not always in our gaining, but in the losing. And God is in the losing so that he can truly free you up to serve your neighbor where he has placed you.

This is the third point: To take up your cross and follow Jesus ultimately means freedom. Since you've lost your life, what else is there to lose? Now you can confess your sins to God and your neighbor, knowing that you've already been totally forgiven. It means you can rest in the fact that you don't need to impress anyone because God is not an abstraction; God is your father and you are his child, and you can take on all of life's suffering and disappointment with patience and grace. And ultimately as you die, you can say with your last breath, with a sure and certain hope in the resurrection from the dead, that Jesus Christ *is* the Messiah.

***The Rev. Jacob Smith** is the rector of Calvary – St. George's Episcopal Church in New York, N.Y.*