

Rev. Cornel Barnett, D. Min.
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
September 13, 2015

Psalm 19, Mark 8:27-38
"Reality Check"

Presbyterians believe that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. These are loaded words. In Lord, we affirm Jesus's divinity and his ultimate authority for our lives, not the authority to jump off a cliff but the authority to be caring and compassionate and to affirm peace with justice. Savior is from the root "salve" to heal, thus Jesus heals our wounds, forgives our sins, and makes us whole. A basic tenet is that we are reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. From this basic belief and tenet, we theologize and question.

Have you had the need to check out with a close friend or spouse what people think of you? How am I to know who I am? It may be good have a reality check in with others. If this line of questioning sounds strange, we only need to turn to the gospel passage today and see that that's what Jesus does.

Jesus is at the mid-point of his ministry and it seems he is keen to check out how others and his followers perceive him. He either wants to know if he is coming across as he intends, in other words, if people have an accurate perception of who he thinks he is, or it might be that he wants feedback to improve himself.

The latter notion is wild. During the summer, I stepped out of Suellen's sister Jane's house with Jane and looked over miles of cornfields. I said that it is amazing how many stories Jesus told with agricultural motifs. That it was amazing how much he knew about agriculture. Jane replied, "Of course, he knew everything. He was the Son of God."

Although I also believe that Jesus was the Son of God, I said we look at things differently and moved onto another subject. If Jesus were "fully human, fully God" as our Brief Statement of Faith affirms, then he must have evolved as a human being as we do. How can one be fully human and not have room for growth? Is that not the nature of being human? That is the study of Christology and a million scholars have written books on the subject.

This is how scripture tells it, "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?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered

him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. (Mark 8:27-30)

Jesus might be thinking, "That's pretty good: John the Baptist, Elijah, and one of the prophets." All are compliments of the highest order. A prophet in the biblical sense is one appointed by God to speak God's word to power; to say, "Thus says the Lord..." and in doing so affirm peace with justice, compassion and caring in the tradition of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Micah.

Most Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah. If the word got out that Jesus thought he was the Messiah, he would get into big trouble with the religious authorities. Therefore, he wanted no word said of it. It would mean he thought of himself as God and that would be blasphemy punishable by death. He died anyway, later on the cross, for blasphemy and sedition, according to Presbyterian theology.

For now, the important question for Jesus' disciples and for us is who we think Jesus is or as a Mennonite pastor, who does not identify himself or herself online, puts it, "Will the real Jesus stand up."

He or she states that people may not like the church or even dislike churchgoers but people like Jesus – at least those who know about Jesus. The pastor asks the question, "Who is Jesus for you?" She or he says that this as the most important question we need to answer for ourselves today.

The pastor goes on, "How many people in and outside the church know the "real Jesus" (myself included)? Perhaps the reason on Facebook and other places we "like" Jesus so much is that we have created a "Jesus" of our own liking, a "Jesus" of our own pleasure, a "Jesus" of our own design? But is this "Jesus", the "Jesus" the world seems to be affirming, in actuality the "real Jesus"?

The pastor (and he/she does the homework on this one. It is a Facebook kind of search and answer and has a youthful spirit), continues, "We have created so many "Jesus's today..."

- There's the Patriotic Jesus who is wrapped in our flag thereby the assumption is all that we do must be blessed by God.
- There's the political conservative Jesus who is against budget increases and stands for "family values" and owning firearms.
- There's the political liberal Jesus who is suspicious of Wall Street and Wal-Mart, yet passionate about being tolerant and "green"/reducing our carbon footprint.
- There's Starbucks Jesus who drinks fair trade coffee, loves spiritual conversations, drives a hybrid and goes dumpster diving.
- There's Open-minded Jesus who loves everyone all the time no matter what, except for people who are not as open-minded as they are.

- There's Touchdown Jesus who helps athletes run faster and jump higher than non-Christians and seemingly determines the outcomes of Super Bowls.
- There's the Red-Carpet Jesus who helps Christian actors and actresses win prestigious awards.
- There's Hollywood Jesus who is meek and mild, with high cheekbones, flowing blond hair, and walks around barefoot, wearing a sash and looks like the guy from the seventies musical "Jesus Christ Superstar".
- There's the John Lennon Jesus who teaches everyone to give peace a chance, imagine a world without religion, and helps us remember all you need is love.
- There's Yuppie Jesus who encourages us to be happy at all cost, tells us that "bigger is always better", and a sure sign you have been faithful is obtaining substantial debt.
- There's Spirituality Jesus who hates religion, churches, pastors, priests, and doctrine; and would rather have people finding the god that is within us all.
- There's Revolutionary Jesus who teaches us to rebel against the status quo, stick it to the "man" or "stick it to "system" as long as it doesn't inconvenience or impact our own way of life or a promised privileged inheritance.
- There's Guru Jesus, a wise, inspirational teacher who believes in you and simply wants to help you find your path in this life.
- (Lastly) There's Lone Ranger Jesus who is all about first meeting your personal needs, your personal wants, your personal desires...preferably right now!

(This collection is adapted from a list by Kevin DeYoung. There are touches of the real Jesus in many of them)

Robert W. Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar and author of *Honest to Jesus – Jesus for a New Millennium*, writes, "The Jesus of the gospel records is an enigma to us because he belongs to an alien time and place. On the authority of those same records, he belonged to yet another time and place even for his contemporaries; by virtue of his vision, he did not belong to their everyday world either. We should not be surprised to learn that the Jesus no one really knows is a subverter of causes. That he tramples with disdain on our saccharine sentiments. That he contradicts the labels that we pin on him. That he rejects our honors and adoration. That Jesus, like the real Abraham Lincoln and the real Socrates, floats there in the collective imagination as an elusive but endlessly tantalizing figure who, if liberated, promises to help us discover who we really are and what life is all about." (p.18). Funk's "if liberated" means Jesus liberated from ideologies and stereotypes of him.

Jesus reveals himself repeatedly in the Gospels and the remainder of the New Testament and Bible when interpreted correctly. We continue to seek the best we can whom Jesus is and how we can live the life he establishes for us and challenges us to.

In the passage read today, he says, "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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" (Mark 8:34-37).

The key to understanding this text is taking up our cross. Here we identify with the suffering of the world, we do what we can to alleviate suffering, and in doing so, we may deny our own wants or needs and may not gain the whole world. I cannot think of gaining the *whole* world so the latter applies more to the controllers of corporations. We identify with Jesus's suffering and resurrection; we face death and affirm life.

Reality check: Jesus asked, "Who do people say that I am?" He later asked, "But who do you say that I am?" Reality check: Who am I? Who am I as Jesus Christ in me? As we go into and through this new church year let us continue to think about whom Jesus is for us and what he can do for our world. Let us own his message and put it into practice the best we can. Amen.