

“American Jesus”
Mark 8:27-38

In 2008 I took a course at Drew University that was called “American Jesus.” One of the assignments of the class was to look around the church building and to see what images of Jesus our congregation has. This was in an effort to understand the congregation’s dominant understanding of Jesus. At first I thought the assignment was ridiculous. How could I possibly put my finger on such a vague and broad concept? But as a good student I went around the church building looking for images of Jesus. At first, I thought that we had no images of Jesus in the building. But when I paid closer attention, I discovered several. I found a couple of them in the children’s chapel upstairs. I found several copies of the famous 1941 Sallman’s *Head of Christ*. It was interesting to hear from several of you about your image of Jesus. Even though, the “traditional” image of Jesus is still lingering in the art found around the church building, many of you had a variety of images and understandings of Jesus. Some of you are even searching for new understandings. And this is no light matter because I believe that the way we view Jesus defines our faith, especially in our culture where Jesus takes a prominent spot as a national hero or an icon.

In his book *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, Stephen Prothero of Boston University shows how Jesus has become more than just a religious figure. When the Puritans arrived, God was the focus of Christianity, but over the next 200 years, Jesus has supplanted his father as the central figure in the religion, and was appropriated for different roles by other groups and religions within the country. Some have painted Jesus as more feminine, caring and comforting, while others portray him more masculine, a manly leader and redeemer. Prothero also details how non-Christians have redefined Jesus for their own uses. The United States is one of the most religious countries on earth, and most Americans belong to one Christian church or another. But as Stephen Prothero argues many of the most interesting appraisals of Jesus have emerged outside the churches: in music, film, and popular culture; and among Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and people of no religion at all: Jesus the Black Messiah; Jesus the Jew, Jesus the Hindu sage, Jesus the Haight-Asbury hippie, Jesus the superstar, and Jesus the Mormon elder brother. Prothero notes that “It is highly unlikely that Americans will ever come to any consensus about who Jesus really is, but they have agreed for some time that Jesus really matters. In a country divided by race, ethnicity, gender, class, and religion, Jesus functions as common cultural coin. To be sure, this cultural Jesus is a shadow of the biblical Son of God, but the public is drawn to him nonetheless.”

But even with his popularity in our culture, Jesus is truly a controversial and dividing figure, especially among Christians because of our different understandings of him and his teachings. In his book *Jesus*, biblical scholar Marcus Borg notes that, “Christians in the United States are deeply divided about what it means to follow him:

- Many followers of Jesus oppose evolution and defend the literal-factual truth of the Bible’s stories of creation. Yet followers of Jesus were the first to reconcile evolution with the Bible by understanding the Genesis stories symbolically and not literally.
- Followers of Jesus are among the strongest supporters of our nation’s invasion and continuing occupation Iraq. Followers of Jesus are among its strongest critics.
- Followers of Jesus are among the strongest opponents of gay marriage. Followers of Jesus are among its strongest advocates.”

So, how do we even begin to sort through all of these different images and understandings? Which one do we proclaim? Which one is the correct one? Does our faith depend on finding the one and true understanding of Jesus?

The most interesting thing about all these questions is that they are as old as the Christian story itself. The early church councils struggled for years to define the nature of Jesus. In today's Bible story from Mark 8, we hear Jesus' own disciples wrestle with this question and Jesus is the one prompting this by saying, "Who do you say that I am?" This story is a central section of the Gospel. It is preceded by a story of the healing of a blind man. When the man begs for healing, Jesus touches the man's eyes and asks, "Can you see anything?" He replies, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking". Jesus then touches him again, "and his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly" (v. 25, 8:22-26). This healing, set in such a strategic position, is not simply about a blind man being healed, for it is the only miracle in Mark that occurs in stages. In the healing of this blind man, the man first receives "fuzzy vision" and then "clear". Thus, in Peter's confession, the disciples only get a "fuzzy" understanding of what it means for Jesus to be "Messiah" or "Son of Man".

People had their expectations of who Jesus should be. They had their history and prophecies. Some people believed he was John the Baptist resurrected from the dead, others believed he was Elijah or one of the prophets. There were all kinds of speculations about who Jesus was and his true mission. The disciples were expecting him to be the Messiah, just as Peter said. They wanted him to be their political leader just like King David was. They saw in him a hope for the restoration of the political kingdom of Israel and a hope to rise above the Roman occupation. Instead, Jesus called himself the "Son of Man" (8:31, 38). Why does Jesus insist on calling himself "Son of Man" when Peter has called him "Messiah"? What is it about the person of Jesus that Peter and the disciples still do not understand? "Messiah", in Hebrew, means "the Anointed One". It was primarily used for the kings of Israel and Judah (29 times; cf. II Sam. 1:21). The kings of Israel and Judah were called "Messiah" just like Egyptian kings were called "Pharaoh" and Roman emperors "Caesar." Jesus did not want to associate himself with that perspective. His whole ministry had proclaimed the exact opposite! He had stood in solidarity with the outcast and the poor, not with the powerful and wealthy. He had stood against the systems, criticizing them and calling them to biblical accountability for their lust to build their power at the expense of the poor. Jesus instead preferred the title, "Son of Man" for himself. The title is used in two ways in the Hebrew Bible: First, to refer to any man (Num. 23:19; Job 35:8; Ezek. 2:1), second, to refer to an apocalyptic person in Daniel 7:13-14 who is described in strikingly similar language to Revelation 11:15. In the non-canonical book of Jewish literature, Enoch, the title "Son of Man" referred to the Elect One who will sit on the throne of glory in order to "try the works" of the righteous and the holy (Enoch 45:3). His concern will not be the accumulation of power and wealth, but the building of justice and equity (chs. 46-48, 62-71). He will remove from their thrones any kings or priests who have persecuted or worked against the poor or weak (46:4-8). He will call forth the practice of a politics of justice, an economics of shared wealth that will eliminate poverty and the building of a people in relationship with God (chs. 46-48). And this will include, not just Jews, but Gentiles, as well. The "Son of Man" will not be a conquering Messiah, but rather a suffering one who will be killed by the systems but will rise triumphant to "sit on the throne of his glory" (62:2-5). It is very clear that Enoch's model of the Son of Man was the point of reference for Jesus' own ministry to which he was called far more fully than did the more triumphalistic image of "Messiah."

This image of a suffering servant of Jesus did not sit well with the disciples. In fact, Peter took Jesus aside and tried to talk him out of it. This understanding of Jesus is still difficult for many of us today. We would rather have Jesus be a lot stronger than this because the bottom line is that if Jesus is associated with God, we would like to see that God is a lot more powerful. But what is often forgotten is what we see in God is usually our own projections, our own images of power and strength. But if our understanding of Jesus is to be anywhere near accurate, we must be willing to learn the lesson of his life, a life of letting go of power, a life of solidarity with those who

are powerless in the world, a life of absolute love for justice and peace. Henri Nouwen put this beautifully when he said, "Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes radically against my inclinations, against the advice of the world surrounding me, and against the culture of which I'm a part." Following Jesus to the cross means letting go of our own power, so that we can find our true power.

I don't know what your image of Jesus is and I don't believe that there is one way to understand him. But whatever you may hold as true and dear to your heart about Jesus, I hope you will follow him into the depth of your heart where the powers of the world don't hold any sway and where you can find your true power in God's love. Megan McKenna calls the Gospel of Mark "a primer on conversion, a summons to discipleship... True discipleship calls us to sink further and further in the waters of our baptisms, which are mysterious, fearful, and wondrously filled with grace."

A stream was working its way across the country on its way to the open sea. The stream experienced little difficulty as it flowed around the rocks and through the mountains. But then it arrived at a desert. The little stream tried to cross the desert, but it found that as soon as it met the sand, its waters dried and disappeared. After many attempts at success, the stream became discouraged. Then a voice came from the wind: "If you stay the way you are, you will never cross the desert. You cannot become more than a quagmire. To go further, you will have to lose yourself." "But if I lose myself," the stream cried, "I will never know what I'm supposed to be." "Oh, on the contrary," said the voice. "If you lose yourself, you will become more than you ever dreamed you would be." So the stream surrendered to the drying sun. And the clouds into which the stream was formed were carried by the raging winds for many miles. Once the stream crossed the desert, it poured down from the skies, fresh and clean and full of the energy that comes from storms, whose waters flowed into the waiting arms of the wide, open sea. The way of Christ is the way of letting go of our power as we know it so that as St. Athanasius of Alexandria put it, "God became human so that each human might become God." Amen.