Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: September 13, 2009

Following Our Untamed Lord, Robert B. Culp
Mark 8:27-38

There's a lot of truth in the observation that Jesus is very big business these days. If you are a book publisher, a television producer, or a film-maker, all you have to do is to pose the question "Who do people say Jesus is?" ... and you can pretty much open up with all your profits a huge bank account.

From Mel Gibson's The Passion of Christ to The Da Vinci Code, and the many books that have been generated by those two movies alone; from the Left Behind book series (with sales topping 65 million copies) that deals with Jesus' return as a righteous flaming judge to Marcus Borg and the Jesus Seminar trying to identify what they see as accrued traditions to get at the "real" Jesus ... it seems that everybody's got an opinion. In my study at home, I have more than 40 books that deal with the figure of Jesus, each of them with a different point of view, and most of them published in the last 15 years.

There is even a website that sums it up nicely: "Who is Jesus? Legend, Lunatic, Liar, or Lord?" Indeed, if Jesus were to visit us in Greenwich this coming week and asked the question "Who do people say that I am?" ... I suspect he would need several days and a lot of strong Starbucks coffee to deal with the wide variety of answers that would be thrown at him.

Some years ago within the Presbyterian denomination, vigorous debate took place about the phrase, "Jesus is Lord," with some people wanting the church to affirm unequivocally the Lordship of Jesus, but others wanting a more careful definition of what such language means in our age. As various study groups prayerfully and deliberately considered this matter, it reminded me of that day years ago near Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked that question of his followers.

Some Presbyterians argued that the use of "Lord" was problematic, with a number of African-Americans in the church expressing with great emotion how the word "Lord" harkened back years ago to the term "Master" that African slaves were required to use of all white men. Because of that, they said, "Lord" was a word that conjured profoundly negative impressions and painful memories deep in their bones, and they could not use that word for Jesus. Others, though, noted how important it was to them to acknowledge Jesus as Lord because of its royal connotations, which implied Jesus' rule within their lives. They wanted to proclaim unashamedly that Jesus rules, that he is the One to whom they owe supreme allegiance.

In the end, the denomination affirmed the Lordship of Jesus, of course in the dense language of "Pres-

byterianese." But it taught me afresh that people still wrestle with the answer to Jesus' question of "Who do people say that I am?" ... and that a number of people tend to frame their answers in terms that reflect their own political or social or personal agendas. There's a funny line in a song by a group called "The Austin Lounge Lizards," and the refrain in the song goes: "Jesus loves me, but he can't stand you." You know, it never ceases to amaze me how many different understandings of Jesus we have in the Christian church, and how many times we throw such harsh rocks of judgment and biting derision at others whose understandings are not like ours ... and all in the name of Jesus.

Now, what do you think? Why did Jesus ask that question in the first place, and still poses that question of us almost 2,000 years later? What difference does it make what we call Jesus? Well, it does make a difference, and Peter found out the hard way. Interestingly, when Jesus asked the disciples who they believed he was, Peter ... though impetuous and impulsive in his demeanor ... Peter got it right! He declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior. And then Jesus told him quickly to put a lid on it and to tell no one. You have to wonder what that's all about, don't you? I mean, don't you think the disciples should have been able to shout it from the mountaintops and in the marketplaces? Why ask the question if the right answer isn't going to be rewarded?

Well, maybe it's because Jesus looked into Peter's eyes and saw the dazzling reflection of earthly stars. He had declared Jesus to be the Messiah, but Peter had a glorious vision dancing in the shimmering moistness of his eyes of a great throne with 12 chairs set up close by for the "Friends of Jesus." Triumph and glory filled his head, especially in light of Jesus' healings and all the crowds.

Jesus, though, abruptly stopped Peter in his illusory tracks, because his vision of the Messiah and the Messiah's work was a vision that Peter and the others couldn't quite grasp in all its fullness. Peter had a vision of exciting pomp and circumstance, of victorious trumpets and grand celebrations, and of Israel's defeat of Rome and its rise to become a power to be reckoned with in the world.

But Jesus' vision was that of a cross.

Jesus says "No!" to Peter. That's not who I am, no matter what people may be saying, and no matter what you may be hoping. For this is who I am. I am the one who suffers. Mark puts it this way: "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed ..." I am the one who suffers. After 2,000 years we still haven't figured out what kind of title we can affix to that reality. We have such titles as Lord and Good Shepherd, Prophet and Rabbi, Healer and Savior, Bread and Light; which we readily can affirm. "Sufferer," though, is not a title that we easily use in our worship or prayer language.

It's not just "Sufferer," though, but "one who suffers for and with others." Bearing a cross does not mean putting up with a wayward child or a serious illness or a bump in the road along the way, as our popular culture often calls those things "our crosses to bear." Rather, bearing a cross means suffering for others. And we struggle to grasp not only what Jesus means by such words, but also for whom Jesus would suffer. Indeed, who are the ones Jesus has in mind for the suffering that awaits him?

Jesus indicates that he is going to suffer for those 12 disciples with all those stars in their eyes; for Judas who would take the money and betray Jesus; for the closest followers who would run away in fear and trembling when the going got tough; even for Peter who would get amnesia near a courtyard fire, telling the folk there that he did not know the One he had proclaimed as "the Messiah."

But he will not suffer just for the good and righteous folk, those who had no need for healing or saving.

Because Jesus is going to suffer for the women who will weep at the foot of the cross, for the thieves on either side of him on Golgotha, for the Roman soldiers casting lots for his clothes, for the little children he embraced and bounced on his knees, and for the lepers and prostitutes and tax collectors and outcasts of all sorts.

Jesus will give his life in love, and, laying his life down, he will suffer in order to bring justice and healing and new life ... in order to reconcile us all with the God who will not abandon us and to free us to accept that gift.

Now, taking up such a cross is not what Peter and the rest of the disciples had in mind, nor probably what we have in mind when we think of the path of Christian discipleship. Give us the cute, cuddly baby in the manger, the Christmas card Jesus, with chubby cheeks and a head full of hair, the essence of innocence and hope, with echoes of "Silent Night" being heard in the background. Or else, show us the Risen Christ, triumphant in glory, his arms outstretched, and trampling the powers of evil and death as we sing "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today." But in between those two images of Jesus is the Jesus we would rather not see, the one who ultimately was despised and rejected and hanging on a cross, calling forth the mournful words of "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded."

It is a painfully difficult image for the disciples and for us to embrace. For in those moments in Caesarea Philippi Jesus makes it as clear as he can to Peter that his identity is that of one who suffers. And he also makes it clear to the disciples, indeed followers in every age, that if they really want to follow him, they themselves need to be willing to suffer for and with others. You see, being a disciple is not just about feeding and clothing those who need it, though it is about that. It's not just about healing the sick or calling sinners to turn their lives around, though it is about that. It isn't just about speaking truth to power and standing up for the powerless, though it is about that as well. Nor is it just about embracing the fullness and joy and goodness of each day's wondrous challenges and the precious gift of life in abundance, though it most certainly is about that.

It's also about being ready to suffer for the people for whom Jesus suffered, and to love them and be with them in life-giving ways. It's about suffering with them and with each other, and in that compassionate suffering, our finding occasion for new visions and new understandings of just who our Lord is, beyond all the labels over which we may argue and wrangle endlessly, and coming to know, too, just who we really are in relation to him, and others.

In 1932, Dorothy Day, who had been struggling and puzzling over the purpose of her life, envisioned what became the Catholic Worker Movement – a network of people committed to seeing and serving Jesus in the life of the poor. Her commitment took her to picket lines, to jail, and to her typewriter where she wrote passionately about injustice and also about the mysterious depths of love. She chose voluntary poverty, which she clearly distinguished from the destitution imposed upon the poor by the systems and structures of injustice.

She lived her life in such a way that what she believed, and wrote, and lived were one. She also practiced what she called "the duty of delight," dwelling in a freedom that comes from the clear sense that one has nothing left to lose.

Dorothy Day's relentless and tenacious witness to the importance of working for a "society where it is easier for people to be good" made her a troubling figure. She confounded both the hierarchy of her church and the FBI. And though she was eventually was viewed with great awe and reverence, she resisted being called a saint, insisting to the end of her life in 1980, "I don't want to be dismissed that easily."

Indeed.

Henri Nouwen once reminded us that Jesus comes "not after all our misery has passed, but in the middle of it, not in another place, but right here where we are standing."

He tells a story from the Jewish tradition of a rabbi speaking to the prophet Elijah and asking when the Messiah will come. Elijah tells the rabbi to ask the Messiah himself. "But where is he?" the rabbi asks. "Sitting at the gates of the city." "But how shall I know him?" "He is sitting among the poor, covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at once and then slowly bind them up again. But the Messiah unbinds one wound at a time and then quickly binds it up again, saying 'Perhaps I shall be needed. If so, I must always be ready so as not to delay for a single moment.'"

Let us pray: O Lord, you dare to go into places of desperate poverty as well as overflowing abundance, seeking in all places to touch the deep needs you encounter in loving and untamed fashion. For yours are wounds that heal and a cross that offers new life. May we dare to follow you, empowered by your Spirit and strengthened by your love from which we are never separated; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.