

First Congregational Church of Royal Oak
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 12, 2021
Communion Outdoors / Rally Day

First Reading: N/A
Gospel: Mark 8:27-38

“Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world.” Harriet Tubman

Who Are You, Jesus?

There is a piece of wisdom that often makes its way on social media: “What other people think of you is none of your business.” And there is wisdom in that. As one of my mentors taught me, no one is loved or hated by all people. What people think of you can say more about them than it does about you.

Jesus, however, wants to know what people are saying about him – maybe. I don’t think Jesus is as concerned about the general population’s opinion of him as much as he wonders what his disciples think of him. They have been with him day and night for some time now. Do they get who he is? Will they continue his message when he is gone?

Today’s reading is a turning point in the Gospel of Mark. It is the first time that Jesus discloses to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer under the hands of the high priests, die, and then be raised up in three days; what we call his “passion”. The author of Mark believes that Jesus’ entire ministry must be seen through the lens of Jesus’ passion, or it makes no sense. Jesus is not just some nice guy or a gifted prophet. His life and passion have a purpose.

You see, although Peter gets the answer correct, “you are the Messiah”, Peter’s definition of Messiah and Jesus’ definition of Messiah are extremely different. Peter believes the Messiah will come to bring Israel back to its former political glory. And that is not the message of the cross. Jesus came to bring about God’s reign – not to give any specific group of people political power over another. Something, imho, that the universal church needs to keep in focus.

Although I feel badly for Peter, he kind of has it coming. Just think of the audacity it takes to take Jesus aside and rebuke or criticize him for this very different understanding of the role of the Messiah. Peter’s focus is on worldly values not the mission of God’s reign.

Jesus knows that the right thing to do, the thing God has called him to do, will be the hard thing to do. Which we, who claim to follow Jesus, need to remember. Because, ultimately, if we choose to rightly follow in Jesus’ footsteps, they will lead to the cross; not political power, not fame and glory, not our way to make us happy and in control, but the cross.

So, who is Jesus for you? Are you sure you know? The thing is, just like Peter we have our own loyalties and blind spots that can trip us up. If someone’s understanding of Jesus is different from ours, we can easily brush them off and hold on tighter to what we believe out of our desire to be right. And let’s be honest, if we can define Jesus, it becomes easier to box him in and keep

him from upending our well-laid out lives. Because who we think Jesus is says much more about us than it does about him.

We like to sanitize Jesus and make him into this image of a “nice guy” not so much for him, but for us. We don’t want to rock the boat. We don’t want to become a target of ridicule for being naive when we give to the poor or a pushover when we forgive our enemy. We don’t want to go to the cross. We avoid it at all costs.

We make Jesus into our image instead of making ourselves into his.

Let’s face it, the way of Jesus is not for the faint of heart. It will challenge how we understand this life we have been given and how we should live it. But the great paradox of the way of Jesus, is that, just when we think we have lost our life, we begin to realize that we are gaining the life God wants for us. A life that goes far beyond any expectations of fame and fortune.

It is now up to us to live and share the message of Jesus to a world in desperate need of knowing that love, compassion, and forgiveness is the way to new life. It won’t be the easy way and it will end up costing us along our way to the cross. But if we choose to truly follow Jesus, we will find the cross is the only way.

Amen.