

Plain Speaking

September 16, 2012

Mark 8:27-38

“Does this dress make me look fat?” How often have these words made husbands cringe in terror and frantically search their brains for the “right” thing to say? Or, “what did you think of dinner?” Or any number of other things that have the potential for a marital explosion.

And it doesn’t have to be a spouse. Maybe a friend or business associate will ask, “How am I doing?” That can lead to panic as well. We know what they’re asking. We know they’re looking for reassurance.

But when you see that they really aren’t doing all that well, or that the quality of their work really is lacking, what do you say – “It could be better”; “Fine”; “OK.”?

Or suppose that dress really is pretty unflattering, or dinner made you wish you had gone out to eat somewhere. What do you say?

We’ve had some interesting discussions in our Wednesday night Bible study group about what are commonly called “little white lies.” Is there really such a thing? Is it sometimes OK to depart from “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

And if so, under what circumstances is that acceptable? Or, is it better to be honest – not mean but not untruthful either. Aren’t relationships better and stronger when they are based on complete openness and honesty?

And doesn’t the Bible teach that we are to speak the truth, in love? Read Ephesians 4:15 and see what Paul had to say about that.

Well, this is an area that a lot of people wrestle with, and I don’t know that we fully resolved it in Bible study.

But I think we were all agreed that speaking openly, speaking the truth, requires not only precision in language but also some degree of courage.

Jesus didn’t have any such problems. He spoke openly, whether he was speaking to the Pharisees or a Gentile, his enemies or his closest friends. And he most definitely spoke openly and plainly to his disciples.

When Jesus began to speak openly with his disciples about what was to come, they were unable to accept his words. They probably were stunned.

Suffering? Rejection? And be killed? No way!

“This simply could not be,” they may have reasoned. “There must be some mistake. We must have heard incorrectly.” Their concept of a messiah did not include suffering, rejection, and murder. Nothing could be more foreign to their understanding.

As was usually the case, Peter jumped up and was the first to speak and act. Speaking for the rest of the disciples, Peter, in disbelief, pulled Jesus aside and began to reprimand him.

For three years, these disciples had witnessed miracle upon miracle. They had seen Jesus give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. They had witnessed the exorcism of demons, the forgiveness of sins, the calming of the sea, the raising of the dead.

They had observed the compassion of this man, even when he was exhausted. They had seen Jesus expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and cure the lepers. Surely this man was the one of whom the prophets spoke. Suffering? Rejection? Killed? No way!

And quite possibly some doubt crept into their thinking at this point: “Have we followed the wrong one? Have we left our homes and families and jobs to follow someone who isn’t what we thought?”

The degree of Peter’s protest demonstrates how Jesus’ teaching about his mission and his fate represented a new way of thinking. A new direction in the way of Jesus was being forged. A new view of discipleship was required.

We all understand how ambiguous messages can be misunderstood. We have just witnessed two political conventions where ambiguous messages were the order of the day.

I truly think politicians and their speech writers spend untold hours coming up with things that may sound wonderful but really don’t say anything. Their whole idea is to leave things vague enough so that people will hear what they want to hear.

But when someone speaks openly and directly as Jesus did here, there is little room for misunderstanding. The problem is that, despite their relationship with Jesus, the disciples did not understand what Jesus was really about. Somehow they had missed the point.

Of course, just like all of their fellow Jewish countrymen, the disciples had a preconception of what a messiah should be. The scriptures they had heard from their childhood told them of one who would be God’s chosen one, one in whom God delighted.

This one would bring forth justice and blot out their sins. This one would open the eyes of the blind and redeem the lost. Had they not witnessed all this in Jesus? Of course they had. The disciples could repeat the prophecies of Isaiah and the others by heart:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke

to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

And even though much of Isaiah was written referring to the time when the exiled Jews would return to their homeland from Babylon, the writings had also come to represent the hope of a nation for the coming of a savior, a deliverer from the bondage and oppression they were under.

“Yes,” the disciples would say to one another. “We have seen these things taking place.” But did they miss the prophecies of Isaiah and the others who spoke of one who would be despised and rejected; one who would be oppressed and afflicted; one who would be wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; a man of suffering and acquainted with grief?

Did they miss that the messiah would enter Jerusalem, “humble and riding on a donkey” (Zech 9:9)?

The disciples’ concept of Jesus’ identity and mission was much like the crowd that followed Jesus. And I guess we really can’t fault those people too much. They had had it tough.

Roman rule was oppressive, and after all, they had been promised, so they thought, someone who would free them from all that and restore them to their rightful place as God’s chosen people.

So, despite the clarity with which Jesus spoke, the disciples just didn’t get it.

What do you think the atmosphere in that room was like as Jesus began to expound on what the future would hold? I imagine Peter’s face must have paled, his composure evaporated. Peter must have felt like a pebble instead of a rock.

Peter’s response caused a response in Jesus that must have cut deeply into the disciples: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Mk 8:33).

From there Jesus lays it on the line quite openly about what it takes to be one of his disciples. “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” (Mk 8:35).

It is a three-point plan. Deny yourselves. Take up your cross. Follow me.

Now, unlike the disciples, some of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day understood exactly what he was saying.. There were elders who understood and fumed. There were priests who understood and spit on the ground. There were scribes who understood and shouted, “Blasphemy!”

Some grasped his call and knew his mission – though in opposition. And the truth of Jesus' words was so threatening to the religious and political powers of that time that they decided to kill him. That is just what they did. Fulfilling what the prophets had forecast, they looted his clothes, mocked his name, and crucified him.

It seems that they saw something that the disciples had not yet grasped.

Let's look back at the opening verse of today's gospel reading, the question Jesus asked that started the whole conversation. "Who do people say that I am?"

This was not the question of an insecure leader seeking to know his standing in the public opinion polls. It was a probing inquiry designed to determine the extent to which people were discovering His true identity, mission and message.

And the answers were really very complimentary. The disciples rehearsed the speculations they had heard. They told Jesus that the fears of Herod Antipas, who murdered John the Baptist, had promoted the theory that He was John raised from the dead.

Others believed He fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi that He was Elijah come to prepare the way for the Messiah. Still others surmised that the vision given to Judas Maccabaeus was being realized: He was Jeremiah who had come with a golden sword to wage war for the deliverance of Israel. Others simply said Jesus was one of the prophets.

It was at this significant moment that Jesus pressed home life's ultimate question. Surrounded by geographical and topographical evidences of humankind's longing for an answer to the riddle of life, and in the emotional context of the varied, but false opinions about His real identity, Jesus asked the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?"

Only one could find his voice to answer. It was not a levered response, and it did not come quickly. "You are the Christ." You are the Messiah. You are the one we have been looking for.

Yet even with that revelation, that understanding, which Jesus acknowledged was a gift from God, it was still a while before Peter and the other disciples really understood what that meant.

God's Messiah did not come to lead the Jews into battle and defeat their enemies. He came to wage a spiritual battle against those things which separate us from God, and thus provide a way for us all to be reconciled to him.

Today, we too are surrounded by the different ways many people have tried to answer the question about who Jesus is. And sadly, even when many people feel that they have their answer, in our efforts to be sure we are accepting and affirming of other religions, we tend to end up very vague about our own beliefs.

I like the statement by a Rabbi friend: "You be who you are so I can be who I am!"

And I will not soon forget the concern of a Muslim who said, "Don't deny your own beliefs in an effort to be so solicitously accepting of mine that you become unsure of what you believe, because then I'll never know what a real Christian is!" What he was saying was, "Don't include me out!"

In the midst of all the vacillating voices answering Christ's question, "Who do men say that I am?" He comes to each of us and puts the penetratingly personal question, "But who do you, for yourself, say that I am?"

Now I do want to insert a word of caution here. The biblical Jesus is not the Jesus we have created of our own making and faking - an easy-going, good natured Jesus who is on call when we want Him to help us deal with our own personal agendas.

Having only this culturalized, benevolent, but somewhat weak "errand-boy" Jesus stunts our spiritual growth. "It's a sniveling modern invention," said George Bernard Shaw, "for which there is no warrant in the Gospels."

The true biblical Jesus-the robust, challenging Jesus, is more than just a comforter. He also confronts us, and He will not accept second place in our lives. He calls us to the exhilarating adventure of dynamic discipleship. Though He meets us as we are with incredible grace, He loves us too much to leave us as we've been.

The authentic Jesus of the Bible tenderly cares for us when we hurt, but He tenaciously exposes anything that keeps us from being all He intends for us to be. His love and forgiveness are unqualified, but also His demands are unequivocal.

He is the Master who holds before us the mandate of the Kingdom of God and is the Lord of all life who calls us to commit all we have and are to Him.

This true, plain-speaking Jesus spoke what have been called, "hard sayings," hard not because they are difficult to understand, but that they are difficult to live. His ultimate question perhaps is the hardest of all if we want to be absolutely honest in how we answer. "Who am I to you...really?"

That cuts like a laser into the core of our being and forces us to evaluate whether our priorities, values and attitudes match a forthright declaration that for us Christ is indeed our Lord and Savior.

If He is that to us, He will raise us up to stand on mountains, to walk on stormy seas, to stand with courage on His shoulders and to be so much more than we ever thought we could be.

This leaves us to decide just as the disciples and the crowds had to decide. Jesus asks each one of us, "Who do you say that I am?" The answer and what happens next is up to you and to me.