

Identity Politics

How fighting over the nature of Jesus prevents us from following Him.

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Proper 8C | Luke 9:51-62

Who is Jesus?

Last week, we explored Jesus's healing of the Demoniac: a man who was full of so many evil spirits, they called themselves Legion. We had a lively discussion on Thursday about location and about who these people Jesus encounters on the other side of the Sea of Galilee might be.

What we encountered was a story of encountering fear. In the previous passage, the disciples are afraid of Jesus. In the next story, the Gerasenes are afraid of Jesus. They are afraid because they see who he really is.

So, who is Jesus?

Is Jesus a prophet? A military leader? Son of GOD? Son of Humanity? Equal with GOD? Person of the Trinity? Healer? Rabbi? Savior? Lord? Liberator? Carpenter? Jew? Christ?

Who is Jesus?

This is the fundamental question in chapter 9 of the gospel we call Luke. What our lectionary skips over is some truly amazing pieces of storytelling, weaving the identity of Jesus with the mission of the disciples. Each snapshot of the people and the moment places a brick in our building of the bridge to understanding and belief. And it pains me that we skip over it. So here's my summary.

What's Missing.

The disciples were afraid because Jesus revealed himself to be more than a prophet and a healer. He can control the elements.

The Gerasenes were afraid because Jesus overcame a Legion of demons -- he is super

powerful. So they drive him back into the boat to go back across the sea. When they get back to their side, they are welcomed and remembered. What a contrast!

Chapter 8 ends with Jesus healing the woman of hemorrhages and raising Jairus's daughter from the dead. So he is a healer of extreme power.

Jesus sends out The Twelve to heal like he does.

In an interlude, Herod is perplexed because he doesn't know who Jesus is. Is he John the Baptist (who he just killed)? Is he Elijah? Is he one of the ancient prophets come back? He wants to find out.

The disciples return from a successful mission to heal people and Jesus feeds the Five Thousand. So he is a provider and wielder of a profound food multiplying power.

Then alone with his disciples, Jesus asks them who people say that he is. We hear the same list Herod heard: John, Elijah, another prophet.

Jesus predicts his Passion, then goes up a mountain for the Transfiguration where Moses and Elijah appear to consult with him. When they come down the mountain again, we see that the remaining disciples struggle to heal a boy. The type of act Jesus had already empowered them to do and they had previously accomplished.

Jesus predicts his passion again and the disciples argue over greatness and an unaffiliated exorcist Peter wants to shut down.

Like I said, there is a ton we're missing in just one chapter!

Identity.

The author of Luke has spent the last five chapters revealing the importance of discipleship. Jesus has empowered his followers from day one to begin to do what he can already do. He shows them how to be like him. And he instructs them so that they can come to believe like he does.

While Jesus tries to help them see what he is up to, they struggle to get past his identity. Even his closest followers are confused by who he is supposed to be. They think he's a Messiah. They think he is a teacher and a healer. They think he is a prophet. They think he is the one they've been waiting for.

They just weren't sure what it is they were waiting for. What the Messiah would look like. Who he'd be.

It seems safe to say they didn't expect magic. They didn't expect things that would overwhelm their expectations. And throughout this and every gospel, they are still wondering who he is.

And we have spent two millennia, two thousand years, arguing over identity.

The First Thousand Years

In the early years after Jesus, our people were happy enough just exploring who Jesus was. But soon enough they started arguing and debating his nature, pushing enough conflict that the Roman emperor would call a great council to settle it once and for all.

Just so you know, they didn't.

After hundreds of years and several more great councils, each dealing with some aspect of identity, for Jesus and for his followers, the winners of these debates argued that we were much closer to knowing Jesus.

The losers, of course, tell a different story. Those that survived the fights, that is. Since many were killed or abandoned or cast out.

The Second Thousand Years

The next thousand hasn't been much better. After killing off, excommunicating, or driving off the diversity which embodied the faith of the first thousand years, it seems as if our last ten centuries have dealt with our having painted Jesus into a corner.

With all these names and identities, we have continued those early conflicts over nature and character of Jesus. Instead of fighting over over the words we use, we now fight over the collected words we use: the liturgies, creeds, and poetry of our faith.

We have spent 2,000 years fighting over the identity and nature of the Jesus we encounter. Just like the people who encountered him 2000 years ago.

If we look at the history of our faith, we see that Christians are far more obsessed who Jesus is than what Jesus asks his followers to do. We are more interested in the man than the mission.

Discipleship.

Woven in this chapter are teachings and moments of empowerment that his followers (including you and I) take for granted. While they are focused on the identity of Jesus, they are missing his constant, laser-like focus on discipleship. They miss the through-line of his teaching and Jesus's determination that they embody their faith and do as he does, not just memorize what he tells them.

As he says to the pious young man, there is more to following Jesus than doing everything right. There's that matter of self-sacrifice and devotion to GOD's actual mission.

There are two subtle moments in this morning's passage and the one right before it which show how they and even the reader, may be more focused on identity than they are on the mission. Peter tells Jesus about this exorcist who is casting out demons and how he told him to stop and Jesus is like: He's doing

what we're doing. That means he already is on the same team. It isn't about the identity of this person, but the work he's doing!

And here, as they pass through Samaria, the locals don't get Jesus because he is focused on Jerusalem. He isn't bringing them along. Nor is he stopping for would-be followers to say their goodbyes. He's on his mission. And his mission is to reveal GOD to humanity and teach these jokers behind him how that is their job too. A mission that has action (do it) and urgency (do it now).

Mission.

What we see in reading this gospel through to this point is a GOD-sent prophet heading toward Jerusalem to do what GOD has called him to do. Yes, he has many titles. Yes, he has many powers. And yes, we know, he is the Messiah of our faith. He is the Christ in our Christian identity.

But...GOD did not send Jesus so that we'd argue over his identity. But that Jesus would point the way to GOD.

GOD did not send Jesus so that we could worry about his historicity or his actuality. But that we would find him and believe through him.

GOD did not send Jesus so that we would come up with the fancied way of describing Jesus's true nature. But that we'd speak for ourselves about our encounter with the divine.

GOD sent Jesus so that we would have a better relationship with GOD and build a better world than we did when left to our own devices.

Jesus's mission is not to be a passive participant in his own life: to be named as having been conceived, birthed, killed, resurrected, and ascended in a creed. Jesus's mission isn't to convince us with logical arguments to worship him. Jesus's mission is to help us see the mission.

Today's excerpt of the gospel doesn't reveal the mission: but our struggle to understand the mission. To see that our mission is to do the mission. The mission the author has spent 9 chapters revealing and Jesus has spent 2000 years revealing. A mission of love. A mission of justice. A mission of life.

A mission that is ours. We are invited to eat with the riff raff and proclaim good news to them because these are the people for whom Jesus's coming is good news, the best news. To sweep aside our impulse to condemn and call forth fire from heaven for the pettiness of fear and the ignorance of our world-weary souls.

Most importantly, we're called to hear those simple words "follow me" as an invitation with a small window of opportunity. Not to believe or understand or try to get it all right. But to accept this call to act because the chance to change the world is before us right now. It hasn't past. It isn't too late. And we can't afford to wait until tomorrow, to see if the window is still open.

Because he's on his way to Jerusalem and our job is to follow him there.

May we keep our eyes on that mission in spite of all the world's diversions. May we do the mission, embody the mission, become the mission. And may GOD's grace and love and justice fall upon us like manna: the food of life, the food of redemption. Amen.