

“Liberals Listening to Jesus”  
September 17, 2023

Mark 8:27-30

Last Sunday, I asked “What is happening on this corner,” and gave one answer: we are seeking to support children and youth. Today and on the Sundays ahead, I’m going venture some other answers.

What’s happening on this corner? Liberals are listening to Jesus.

Now, it seems that Jesus is encountering some hard times right now.

Russell Moore is the editor of the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*. He was the President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. But his vocal criticism of both the candidate and the president, Donald Trump, led to a backlash among Southern Baptists and calls for his resignation.

Recently, he’s been talking about conversations he’s had with several pastors telling him basically the same story: they quote the Sermon on the Mount while preaching, maybe mentioning Jesus’ telling his followers to “turn the other cheek.” And after worship someone comes to the minister and asks: “Where did you get those liberal talking points?”

What alarmed Moore is that in most cases, when the pastor would say, I’m “literally quoting Jesus Christ,” the response would not be, “I apologize.” The response would be, “Yes, but that doesn’t work anymore. That’s weak.”

When I was a child, we used to sing of Jesus: “Little ones to him belong, We are weak, but he is strong.” Now conservative Christians seem to have flipped that old song on its head.

Moore concluded that “When we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as subversive, then we’re in a crisis.”<sup>i</sup>

Jesus just isn’t cutting it anymore with a lot of conservative Christians.

But liberal Christians? We love Jesus. And we’re listening.

Yes, there’s that old joke that “UCC” stands for “Unitarians *Considering* Christ,” as if that we’re just not quite on board with this Jesus. That, of course, is not really the case.

Liberals listen to Jesus, not because he is weak, but at least in part, because his teachings *are* subversive. His words continue to challenge our assumptions and our actions; they continue to show new possibilities when we see that things are not right with ourselves or our world.

And, perhaps even more, we listen Jesus because of the questions he asks.

This congregation loves questions. Back in the distant past when people still used phone books—remember phone books?—we had a Yellow Pages ad that included the phrase: “Respecting Questions” as a way of describing this congregation. It was a good example of truth in advertising.

Those of you who have been around here for a while know that as people of faith, we kind of *enjoy* questioning worn-out truisms, that some of our most frequently used words are “*Why?*” and “*What about...?*” Most Sundays, after preaching what I like to think was a tightly reasoned sermon, I’m greeted by people who say: “Just a few questions...Have you considered...?”

If you are new to the Congregational UCC you will find that we are church that expresses our faith as much in the questions we ask as in the answers we give. You will find that we are a community in which you can ask the questions that are important to you, the questions that are bothering you. And if we can’t give you an answer, we will at least join you in your search.

We listen as Jesus talks and his words get under our skin and into our hearts. We are grateful that Jesus calls into question how we look at the world and how we live in the world. The subvert the easy and established ways we look at ourselves, our neighbors, and our world.

Look as Jesus and his disciples find themselves in the district of Caesarea Philippi. These villages stand between Israel and Gentile territory. They are on the border.

Maybe Jesus is in too deep: Puzzled by a destiny that he may have begun to glimpse but of which he is not fully aware, he reaches a moment of crisis, a time of decision personally and vocationally. At this border, Jesus faces a decision. He must decide if he will run from his calling and his people or head toward Jerusalem.

So, he turns to his companions—a small group that has followed him, although none of them seem to really understand what he is all about. They are probably the closest thing to friends that Jesus has—and we all know what kind of friends they will prove to be in the end.

Listen Jesus does not tell them anything.

Jesus asks: “Who do people say that I am?”

The answers start to come:

Well, some say that you are John the Baptist, announcing the coming of the realm of God.

And some say you’re Elijah the prophet, announcing the end of all things.

Some think of you a just another prophet, calling for justice in a brutal and unjust world.

If he had stopped the questioning then and there,

We could treat Jesus as we might any other figure in the distant past.

We could study about him.

We could give him a label and go on our own way.

But the questions of Jesus are not about the dead past.

Jesus asks a question that challenges us in the living present. A non-committal discussion is transformed into a dialogue in which we become personally involved.

We hear a new question: “Who do *you* say that I am?”

That question still reverberates in our souls as we try to figure out our answer.

This question speaks to the head and to the heart.

It addresses the *head* because it is about our knowledge. Like you, I’ve made many attempts at answers:

In Jesus I see who God is in a unique way. Jesus is God made known in flesh and blood, God revealed in a human life.

In Jesus I see the God who heals, the God who loves, the God who is intimately involved in human life, not distant in time or space.

In Jesus I see an image of what I could be—what *we* could be—because he is the embodiment of the humanity for which we were all created. I learn more of who I am as I discover more of who Jesus is.

I answer the question in these ways—at least in part.

But the question comes to you as well: “Who do *you* say that Jesus is?”

However you answer this question, you know that it is a question that will not let you go. The answer is not settled. You know that *your* answer matters—indeed it makes all the difference in how you will live. It is a question that addresses our *head*, that calls forth our best thinking, throughout our lives.

This question also addresses our *heart*. It asks about our commitments, our passion. It is not a question about knowledge alone. It is a question that asks about our *response* to this person. If, as Peter says, Jesus *is* the Christ, the *anointed one* of God, well, what will that mean?

What will that mean about how we relate to other people?

What will that mean about how we spend our time, our money, our hearts?

This is not so much a question about how active you will be *in church*—as important as that is; it is a question about how you will live when this hour is over.

When we try to deal with the devastation that we encounter in our lives,

when we seek to be faithful,

when we attempt to hope,

when we try to love

it is because we believe (however hesitantly) that following in the way of this Jesus provides the strength we need to live and to live fully.

When we show concern about the way others are treated,

when we decide to speak up instead of going along with destructive behavior,

it is because we sense that following in the way of Jesus requires that we live out our questioning faith during the week.

When we are confronted with the faces of hungry people, here and abroad, and find ways to respond,

when we look at other people and decide we've had enough war,

it is because we feel that following in the way of Jesus involves us with the suffering of others as if it were our own suffering.

The questions Jesus asks address our hearts and call us to live with passion and compassion in the world.

This question speaks to our head and our heart.

And if this question—or any of the questions of Jesus—makes you uncomfortable, here's some good news: This question is not for us as individuals alone. It is a question for us as a congregation. Our individual answers are important because they inform our common answer.

Jesus addresses his followers as a group. When he asks: "Who do *you* say that I am?" Jesus uses the second person plural. "What about all of you? Who do you say that I am?"

After what must have been a silence you could drive a truck through Peter says: "You are the Christ." It was a strong, definite answer.

In our Congregational tradition and in our time, we speak together in our actions. We speak together in our giving. We speak together in our common life. By what we do and say we tell the world who this Jesus is—the One who welcomes the stranger and the outcast, the One who stands with the tortured, who points us to the lilies of the field so that we might remember God's providence in our own care for the earth, the One who is with us so that even in deep despair we might find a deeper joy.

When Peter answers this question Jesus doesn't turn around and say: "You've got it right. Good answer. Matter settled."

Instead, Jesus does what he does so often in Mark's Gospel: he tells Peter to be silent. It's one of the most puzzling aspects of Mark and all sorts of explanations have been given. One person

suggests that “the best explanations recognize that Mark wants us to know Jesus but to be humble always about what we do not—and cannot—know.”

And maybe—maybe—that’s why liberals are still able to listen to Jesus. At our best we are ready to admit what we *don’t* know about him. As Thomas Long says: “Something about Jesus always remains beyond our grasp. Whenever people think they have Jesus completely figured out, whenever they are too quick to blab about what they know about God and Jesus and the faith, they have missed the mark.”<sup>ii</sup>

Unlike some others, we at the Congregational Church are usually not “too quick to blab.” Instead, we listen. We listen so that we might be lead into an always grace-filled, always unexpected future as we follow in Christ’s way.

The question “Who do you say I am?” seeks an active response of openness on the part of each one of us and on the part of all of us together. The question seeks, not so much an answer as a response in the choices that we make each day.

And so, we talk about the *life* of faith—not just a single moment.

Here at the Congregational UCC we love questions. That’s one reason why we keep listening to Jesus.

---

<sup>i</sup> NPR. “He Was a Church Official Who Criticized Trump.” August 8, 2023.

<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/08/1192663920/southern-baptist-convention-donald-trump-christianity>

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas Long, “The Mysterious, Divine Identity,”

<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:dc1iGsHKAFAJ:https://liturgicalconference.org/blog/2018/9/10/the-mysterious-divine-identity&c>