

## Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 15, 2024

Introduction to themes for the day and for the season

It sounds like a gut check for his followers when Jesus asks, “*Who do people say that I am*”—Buckle up, though; it’s a gut check for us too.

By its actions, who does today’s Christ-following community “say” Jesus is? We’ll do a little unpacking of that question as part of the sermon.

Prayer of the Day

O God, through suffering and rejection you bring forth our salvation, and by the glory of the cross you transform our lives. Grant that for the sake of the gospel we may turn from the lure of evil, take up our cross, and follow your Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen

Gospel

**Mark 8:27-38**

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 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, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

35 For 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

## Sermon

Jesus doesn't give Peter the gold star for his answer that he is the Messiah. Instead Jesus-shushes the disciples because—if I might rip a quote from the movie *Princess Bride* out of context, we say that word “Messiah”, but Jesus doesn't think the word means what we think it means. In the popular imagination of Jesus' time, people yearned for a Messiah that would be a sort of mash up of military, political and religious might—someone to send those pesky Greeks and Romans packing.

How quickly we imagine Jesus is “on our side” ready to slap the stamp of approval onto our agenda for church, or even our politics. That image deserves to be poked at. The New York Yankee Catcher, 8 in your program Yogi, Berra famously observed that 90 percent of baseball is half mental. The story goes that in a tie game, two out, bottom of the 9th the batter used his bat to draw a cross into the dust on home plate. Now Yogi was known as a devout Catholic who was open in sharing his faith. Yogi brushed his glove across home plate to erase the cross and said to the batter, “let's just let God watch the game.” Put another way, which prayer does God answer...the fleeing rabbit's “deliver me from my tormentor” or the coyote's “Bless us O Lord and these thy gifts which we are about to receive”...

Jesus doesn't teach that God only watches the game; taking exception to Peter's use of the word Messiah signals to us that Jesus doesn't proclaim God as some sort of muscle we can call in to take out the bullies. Martin Luther would critique that sort of impulse; even when dressed in religious garb, as a theology of glory. Instead, Luther and a leader of the resistance against the Nazis, Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer teach that our theology—that way of relating to God—is a theology of the cross.

If we're going to call Jesus a Messiah then we'd better be clear in both how we use the word and how we live in line with Jesus' version of Messiah. Jesus speaks to “all y'all” when he talks about cross bearing and losing life to find it. Part of cross bearing and life losing is to accept that our pet ways of running the world aren't necessarily part of the plan. So what is?

The cross reveals Jesus' absolute commitment to God's ways of creating, liberating and restoring—even when we find ourselves in a horrific scene like the one at the foot of the cross. The theology of the cross teaches us that even in a place so apparently God-forsaken, that's where God's love works most powerfully—not magically, but palpably wherever there is suffering. Messiahs hang out in these

places—Messiahs of Jesus’ sort stand in solidarity with those being crushed by corrupt and abusive power. Even in death, God is present and gets the last word—a word of YES—that God’s love is stronger than death.

As others watch the actions of the whole community of Christ followers, what message do we convey about who WE think Jesus is and what WE think a Messiah is and does? amen.