

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany: Mark 1:29-39

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Our Thursday morning Bible Study has been all over the place lately, and I am having a ball. We've talked about church architecture, Gettysburg, the Borowitz report, and the end of the world, and that was just this week! And one of the big things we've been talking about lately is how some parts of scripture are satirical commentary of their own day. Before we get too far down this path, I just want to remind y'all that satire has been around for a long time. Snarky talking heads on tv didn't invent it. It's not inherently used by the left or the right. But it is very often used to comment on the way things are in the world (as opposed to how they could or even should be). All that to say, have you ever run into a political cartoon or a meme or any other form of media where some satirical thing makes such a good point that you just can't shake it? It's paradigm shifting, like putting on a new pair of glasses and suddenly being able to see that leaves are individual things hanging on trees and not just some big, green smear.

Well I saw one of those, or rather, a series of those the other day that did just that. It uses some of those old sketches of Jesus we know from our treasured illustrated Bibles and puts him in familiar situations, like healing a leper or hanging out with a prostitute, but instead of the generous and loving Christ we're used to seeing, there's a twist. Now, I will warn you. Some of you might find this a little offensive or in poor taste. But remember, that's sometimes the point of satire. The folks making these memes aren't trying to tell us this is right. They're trying to help us see what's so wrong in our own context by doing something this ridiculous. Ok, caveat aside, in these memes, you'll see Jesus and his disciples approaching some sickly looking folks on the side of the road. A disciple says, "Jesus, will you heal these poor men?" And instead of the miracle we expect, Jesus replies, "No, if I heal them, who'll pay for the procedure?" Or when Jesus shows off his newly oiled feet while a woman stands nearby with a jar of ointment, he says, "Now that this prostitute has honest work doing pedicures, she's finally earned a place at my table." Or my personal favorite, to a disciple asking if Jesus can feed a crowd of five thousand, "Of course I can, but they'll have to pass a background check and a drug test before they get a single bite."

Did any of those make you uncomfortable? They did me. Because I know I've said similar things or supported other people saying similar things countless times. What I haven't done well, or what I haven't done well enough, is to say and do those things Jesus would've done. Instead, like probably every Christian that has ever walked this earth, I've said and done what my Jesus would've. Which is to say, I have an image of who Jesus is that's close, but not completely the Jesus of scripture. There are things that he says and does that I love, and there are a handful I like to pretend never happened. But on the whole, even with those blips, I think I know what Jesus was like. He's the kind of Messiah that would've healed those lepers, that did welcome that prostitute to his table without caveat, that did feed thousands, twice. But that twinge we felt when we heard those lines read off, maybe the thing that makes us wince in them is something we recognize in ourselves.

There's a funny thing that happens in the Gospel of Mark. It's called the Markan Secret, or sometimes the Messianic Secret. It's this weird thing where, when someone or something recognizes Jesus for who he is, that is God Incarnate, he tells them not to spill the beans. Like in this Gospel reading, Jesus casts out all sorts of ailments, demons included, but he won't even let the demons speak "because they knew him." Now there are all sorts of theories as to why he keeps this going for so long. Some say there's a right time for the secret to be revealed, and we're just not there yet in the story. Some say he's trying to control the amount of fame he receives because the crowds are getting too big. Some think there's a deeper mystery below the surface still! Regardless, it remains a mystery. We don't really know why he does this, but he does. It's one of the ways you can tell you're in Mark; most of the time, when Jesus says not to reveal who he is, it's here and not one of the other Gospels. Most of the time.

But there's another thing that goes along with this Messianic Secret. Jesus never sticks around in one place terribly long. He lives an itinerant lifestyle. He'll show up in one place, preach, teach, heal some folks, share a meal with somebody, and then skip town, usually leaving behind a crowd hungry for more. Again, there are all sorts of guesses as to why, but lately, I've found one of them to be particularly compelling. See, Jesus knows what it means to be human which means there's a pretty good chance he knows what it means to be star struck. There were plenty of charismatic leaders, religious and political, in his day. Surely he saw someone moving a crowd with their words, and surely he felt that pull to follow, too. To follow the man and not the message. So when he begins his ministry, when he preaches to a synagogue, teaches new things to rapt crowds, feeds thousands who won't go home for dinner because they're afraid they'll miss something brilliant he's gonna say, when he goes inside someone's home to heal the sick and a hole gets cut in the roof just so another can feel his healing touch, when he does his disciple a favor and heals his mother-in-law and word gets out so much so that the entire lawn fills with the countless sick and suffering...when all those things happen, you gotta wonder if Jesus sees himself walking a mighty fine line. It's a mighty fine line between using your gifts and your charism to lead and using the very same to manipulate. I wonder if, when Jesus begins to feel the crowds giving themselves over, if that's his signal to leave. Maybe he's trying to keep the focus on his teaching, and not on who he is as a man. Yes, it matters that he is God Among Us, absolutely, but that's not all that matters about Jesus. What matters just as much is what he came to share. That all people are God's, regardless of their station in life and regardless of what they have done. What matters isn't how close you came to touching the hem of his garment, or how many different places you followed him to in his journey around Judea. What matters is how your life has changed to be closer to what he taught.

These days, we do a lot of things with Jesus. Churchgoers tend to get the right of it, I think. Sure, each denomination has its own way of going about that, but for the most part, church folk are pretty good about knowing and living into the real path that Jesus calls us to. But the rest of the world often misses the mark, using the idea of Jesus, maybe even the celebrity of Jesus as more of a measure than the scriptural portrayal of Jesus. That Jesus is an idol. It's not the real thing and it draws the faithful away from the truth of God in Christ. I think it's a helpful test to see where we're landing to take our ideas, and like those satirical memes, put them in the mouth of Jesus. Not in your own, personal Jesus, but in the full Jesus of scripture, best you can. I don't mean you're making your own scripture here, but you're testing it out. Take an idea you're playing with or an agenda you've read about in the papers, and see how it sounds coming out of Jesus' mouth. Does it sound inspiring? Does it sound like it could've been the forgotten verse of the Sermon on the Mount? Or does it make you wince? Or gross you out? Or offend your concept of faith? I'm not trying to say this is a foolproof litmus test, but I think it helps to clarify what's right in this world and what's perversion. Don't fall for the idol that people call Christ, the wolf in the lamb's clothing. Hold onto the real Christ, the generous, the miraculous, the one willing to set himself aside so that the Good News might spread. Hold onto that, and remember that God teaches us who Christ is, not man. No politician can do that, and probably no preacher can, either, though I gotta admit we try. And ask yourself, "Jesus, would you help them? Would you feed them? Would you love them?" May our answers be his, and his ours.