

Which Jesus?

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Mark 8:27-38

I.

We gather together this morning at the beginning of a new season, a new time in the life of our church family.

At the beginning of a new season it is natural for hopes to run high. It is natural to have big dreams of great success— I for one have dreams of great things to happen for a wonderful congregation. It is also a slightly anxious time. What if things DON'T work out? What if things just don't gel? In each of our personal lives too, there are such times of new beginnings....times to get excited, times we may even worry a bit.

As people trying to follow the path of Jesus, we have a standing invitation to start over, start afresh. But the question of which Jesus we follow will determine how we define that path, and what it means to succeed or fail, in the endeavor. People will offer you many pictures of Jesus, and I don't mean just the paintings or sculptures. Some would have you cleave to a narrow doctrine of salvation; others declare the cosmic triumph of a victorious Lord. But if we really listen to the stories of Jesus in the New Testament, rather than just the Christ of the Church, we meet someone who redefines success and failure, victory and defeat. Jesus calls us to a path that is radically faithful, not to the orthodoxy of the Church, and not to an easy success story, but to Love breaking through in the world, to God who walks the earth.

Reading this week's scriptures, I was struck by troubling words from the book of Isaiah, describing the suffering of the faithful one. Next, in Mark's gospel I found Jesus struggling with the expectations of his friends, and their lack of clarity about who he was and what that meant for them. I found myself asking the question: What defines success? How do Christ's followers have a successful season in our life together? How does a Companion of Jesus live out faith "successfully"? It isn't so much about what Jesus looked like: the question is what does he stand for, then and now? Which Jesus do we walk with? And what will it cost?

II.

Conventional measures of success don't carry much satisfaction. One of the oldest all-American measures of success is sheer numbers. The biggest attendance, the greatest giving, the fattest budget, the grandest building. Oh, and in the church world, a whole lot of church members, thank you very much.

These kinds of measurements have become too popular in the church. And yet... these by themselves have no meaning—they are markers of nothing.

The Jesus of popular culture bears little resemblance to the Jesus of the gospels. Too many folks' image of Christ has been dialed down, while the desire for numbers has been ratcheted up—and so we have a prosperity gospel that rakes in big dollars, and a media-based religion industrial complex. Many will flock to the preachers of the Material Gospel. Others, thinking they actually speak for the Church, will leave the whole enterprise of Faith in disgust. And this is not real success, not by the standards of who we believe Jesus Christ is, nor the path to which he calls us as his friends.

A few years ago, by way of contrast, I introduced a newspaper reporter to seven people who had nothing, but have been trying to follow Jesus their whole lives, with their whole beings. They were refugees freshly arrived from the border of Thailand and Burma. One of the questions Jim, the reporter, asked was: "What are your hopes for the future?" I was touched, listening to Kya Htoo, a man who had very limited formal education and yet almost limitless faith and deep wisdom, as spoke for his little Karen community. His nineteen year old niece interpreted. "We want our children to have educations—so they can be of service, and help the community. And we want to have jobs so that we can have enough to eat and a decent place to live—and share some with those who are still in the camps, and back home in our villages in Burma." As I listened to Kya Htoo I realized that this desire to share, to give back, to be of service: this grows out of his faith.

What defines success, for you, and for me? Success of any sort must be defined by the core vision we hold most dear. It is impossible to succeed unless we succeed at something. And it is not worth succeeding at something unless we succeed at something worth believing in—something bigger than ourselves. Something good and true, something worth sharing.

When Jesus asked his best students who people thought he was, they came up with old-time bible heroes. And when he asked them what *they* thought, they

told him "the messiah"—in other words some one who was going to set the people free from the Romans and restore their nation's freedom and dignity

Jesus was concerned about their definition of where they were all headed, and of how they were going to get there—and about their expectations of easy success, because they had messiah who would do it all for them. He started to tell them about suffering and apparent failure and death being part of the pilgrimage that he was called to. And then he reminded them they were called to pick up crosses too, if they expected to walk in his path. His was not a one person movement! "The cross" was not an abstraction for those people. They had seen Roman crosses! He reminded them that if they wanted to experience new life, they were going to have to do a little dying too, risk "losing it" for the love he was teaching them. They were going to have to let go of their old dreams, their old illusions, and their old ambitions. If they really wanted to experience fulfillment, they were going to have to let go, and get invested in a love much deeper, a hope more profound than making it big quick.

That's what success looked like in the upside down wisdom of Jesus, back a couple of thousand years ago. This is who the Jesus was that everyone was wondering about. What does Success look like for his followers today? And where do we meet him? Which Jesus?

III.

Too often we as Christians have missed the mark. We have mistaken the benchmarks of influence and power as signs of faithfulness rewarded.

And yet there are these wonderful moments of real faithfulness, against all odds. And they happen often! They happen most often outside the glare of public media, among people who remain nameless in the long arc of history.

A personal example: my mother Ineke told me often how she owed her life as a child in the occupied Netherlands during World War 2 to nuns, "the sisters" she called them, in a Catholic hospital. Repeatedly hospitalized because of her diabetes, more than once she entered the hospital in a coma. At the time, she was a little girl in hiding, and living under a false identity. She would wake up in a hospital bed unsure where she was, and not remembering her false name. But she was surrounded by sisters-- who did not question a little girl. They didn't press her— as my mother said, "They weren't in a hurry to ask me my name." And they

placed themselves at risk. A small thing? Maybe! Or maybe, by God's measure, a gigantic moment of success for the Church!

It happens over and over again: people of faith willing to risk their own necks, their own reputations, for the sake of compassion, for the sake of love, for the sake of justice, for the sake of the gospel.

Jesus teaches us that it isn't only the messiah who will need to be ready to give up life and face suffering for the sake of what is most dear. Each and every one of us who wish to walk with Jesus must be ready to face the powers, and suffer the consequences of standing up to power.

IV.

Which Jesus do we follow? There is a Christ who calls us to a way of nonviolent resistance. It is a matter of being ready to embrace suffering, even apparent defeat, in order to transform the world utterly from below, rather than simply rearrange the furniture from on high. We have to be ready to face injustice, if we want to talk about justice. We have to be ready to pay the price of our convictions if we want to go around talking about peace. This is not a grim thing! This is what we embrace joyfully! Because it is the price tag on a world transformed by love.

Emmanuel Friedens Church, I haven't been with you long, but I have been here long enough to know something about you. I know that some of you are folks who have been willing to risk being unpopular because you insisted on speaking out. I know that some of you have helped make decisions that led to your church's almost being kicked out, for being too inclusive of gay and lesbian and bisexual and not-sure people! I know that you are a church full of people who care deeply about helping the world become a more peaceable place...and a more inclusive one. I haven't been here long, but this much I know! You are people willing to reach out in real ways, hands-on ways to your neighbors. You are tender-hearted people, who want to alleviate a little of the suffering in the world around you. I just want to say to you today that this is a reflection of what Jesus looks like to us. All we need to do together is live it. The Jesus we walk with invites us to give witness with our lives to a fabric of love and mercy that is bigger than we are. That will take some work, some prayer, and some courage. It may take some failure, some loss, some suffering along the way. But it's a joyful journey, a pilgrimage full of love and adventure and discovery. Come on! Let's go! Time for a fresh start.