

16th Sunday after Pentecost September 13, 2015
Text – Mark 8:27-3 Theme: “What Jesus Didn’t Ask”

2

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the past several weeks I have received a number of unsolicited and annoying phone calls on my cell phone, and these calls are all nearly the same.

After I answer, “Hello,” there is always a pause and then a click, and then a voice I don’t recognize says, “Hello. This is so-and-so [the name does change each time], and I’m calling about your computer.”

Now nearly every week, I work on three different computers, but the truth is that none of them are mine – they all belong to Pilgrim Lutheran Church. Of course, I don’t explain that, fearing it will just prolong a conversation that I didn’t want to have in the first place!

So what I say instead is, “My computer is not your business,” and then the caller either doesn’t understand, or pretends he doesn’t, so that he can continue the conversation. When he stops speaking, I repeat what I already said: “My computer is not your business.” With that, the caller usually hangs up, but, if not, I do.

It’s likely that you’ve also had someone call you on the phone and start talking, and you had no idea who it was. Or maybe someone left a message for you to return the call, but you don’t know who it is you’re supposed to call.

Luckily, for many of us, caller I.D. has alleviated some of these problem calls. On the other hand, caller I.D. can’t help when people we don’t recognize walk up to us and begin to talk – and we wonder if we are supposed to know them or not.

A level of recognition is important before many of us will risk making ourselves known or vulnerable to someone else. Most of us would not share our most intimate secrets with someone we know just on a “hello” basis, like the service rep at the car dealer, or the mail carrier.

We likely wouldn’t think of sharing our medical history with the kid stocking the shelves at the grocery store, or telling the pizza delivery guy how much money we earned this year. For one thing, on that last one, we don’t want to find out that the pizza delivery guy made more than we did; and, for another, we don’t want him to expect a big tip!

In today’s Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples how he was being recognized. What perception of him did people hold, both those who knew him well, and those who just knew of him?

So Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27). And like a group of students eager to impress the teacher with quick and knowledgeable answers, the disciples began to list the things they had heard people saying.

They suggested that people thought he was John the Baptist, or that he was Elijah, or that he was one of the prophets.

But these were simply descriptions of the observations that people had made. There was no real recognition because no real relationship existed between any of these observers and Jesus.

So Jesus then turned to those with whom he had a relationship, those who knew him best, and he asked again, “But who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29). And it’s at this point that Peter gives the right answer, but perhaps in the wrong context.

When Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, it quickly becomes clear that there is confusion over, not the “who” of the Messiah, but the “what” of the Messiah. Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but he didn’t recognize the “what” of the Messiah’s purpose.

Like everyone else, Peter had pre-conceived ideas of what the Messiah would accomplish for Israel. And the imminent future that Jesus was describing didn’t exactly fit with “who” Peter felt the Messiah was supposed to be.

And maybe we get confused about to whom we are talking when we offer prayers to a “magic genie God” in the sky whom we hope will grant our all wishes and fulfill our all desires.

God listens intently to the prayers of his people, but God is God, not some heavenly servant at our every beck-and-call. If God were that kind of God, we would all be lottery winners and living in luxury.

But then, if that were so. who would grow the food, and build the homes, and make all the conveniences that would give us our luxury?

It’s worth noting that Jesus doesn’t ask, “Who would you like me to be?” He asks, “Who do you say that I am?” He is the Messiah who came to save us. He didn’t come so that our lives might be made easy.

I believe we still get confused about Jesus’ true identity when we compete in sports, or run for public office, or even wage a war, and ask God to be on our side on the assumption that we are the “good guys.”

We are confused about Jesus’ identity when we want him to be our personal Superman, who, faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive, comes to our rescue.

We’re wrong to make Jesus into our own personal campaign manager and God into our indestructible entourage that surrounds and protects us at every corner of life.

Jesus didn’t ask, “Who do you want me to be?” He asked, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29).

He is the Messiah who came to save us. He didn't come so that all of our political, theological, and personal views would become the way of the world.

We still get confused when someone we love dies and leaves this world, when someone we want to be with leaves us and goes to be with someone else, or when we ourselves are stricken with disease, with broken and painful bodies, with the inability to do the things we both need and want to do.

We are certainly confused when we attempt to make Jesus into our personal guardian angel and our private life preserver here on earth. That's what Peter and the disciples thought they needed from Jesus. In their minds, it was Jesus' job to make life for Israel and its people a thing of beauty and glory.

To them, Jesus was the King, the Master Warrior, and Great Physician at the same time. Jesus would lead them down the road to world dominance and create a heaven on earth.

But Jesus doesn't ask, "Who do you need me to be?" He asks, "Who do you say that I am?" He is the Messiah who came to save us. He didn't come to elevate God's people above everyone else on earth with Jesus himself sitting on a golden throne.

There's a totally fictitious story circulating, but one that makes a very good point.

The story begins with Billy Graham preparing to get into his limo one day, when he says to the driver, "You know, I'm getting to be an old man, and I have never driven a limousine. Would you mind if I drive for a while?"

"No problem," says the driver, "have at it." So Billy Graham gets into the driver's seat, the limo driver gets in the back, and they head off down the highway. Of course, a short distance away, a rookie state trooper is monitoring the traffic in his patrol car.

The long black limo flies by him doing 70 in a 55-mph zone. The trooper pulls out, easily catches the limo, and he gets out of his patrol car to begin the usual procedure. The young trooper walks up to the driver's door and, when the dark glass window is rolled down, he is certainly surprised to see who was driving.

He immediately excuses himself and goes back to his patrol car and calls his supervisor. He tells the supervisor, "I know we're supposed to enforce the law, but I also know that important people are sometimes given certain courtesies. I need to know what I should do, because I have stopped a very important person."

The supervisor asks, "Is it the governor?" The young trooper says, "No, he's more important than that." The supervisor then asks, "Have you stopped the President of the United States?"

The young trooper says, “No, he’s even more important than that.” The supervisor finally asks, “Well then who is it?” The young trooper said, “Well, I think it’s Jesus, because he’s got Billy Graham as his driver!” At least the trooper wasn’t confused about who Jesus is.

It simply comes down to this: Jesus came to this earth to serve, not to be served. His service ultimately cost him his life on the cross – that was the price for our salvation.

“Who do you say that I am?” That’s the question Jesus asks each of us. He doesn’t want to know who we would like him to be, or who we want him to be, or even who we think we need him to be. Jesus wants a relationship with us so that we can know “who” he is. “Who do you say that I am?” We answer this question each and every day of our lives. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

Alan Goertemiller, Pastor
Pilgrim Lutheran Church of Indianapolis, Inc.