

God, we have come this day to hear your words of healing love and hope. Grant that we might experience that love and hope through our identity in you. Amen.

September 16, 2018 – Mark 8:27-35

A Case of Mistaken Identity

This morning we find Jesus and his disciples in the area of Caesarea Philippi, which translated means, “Philip’s city dedicated in honor of Caesar.” Philip’s father, Herod the Great, had built a massive marble temple there in honor of the Roman emperor Augustus. And when Philip succeeded his father, he enlarged and embellished the town, formally dedicating it to the Roman Emperor. And so it’s a bit ironic that it’s against this backdrop of both political and religious power that we find Jesus of Nazareth, a penniless Galilean carpenter asking twelve ordinary men what others thought of him. Who exactly did people think he was?

It would have been an important question to the audience of Mark’s Gospel because they had recently experienced a crushing defeat of the Jewish uprising against the Roman Empire. It had been hoped that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah predicted by prophets of old, someone who would deliver them from their enemies. But since he had been crucified, the question now hung in the air as to just who this man was if he wasn’t the one who would lead them to victory.

And so this morning’s text is one that talks about Jesus’ identity. But for those of us who read it from the perspective of a lesbian, a gay man, a bisexual, or a transgender or queer person, it’s also a commentary about our own identity.

As I said, Jesus asks his disciples what others think of him and his identity, even though he knew the truth. It was a truth he had heard at his baptism declaring him to be the beloved child of God, someone in whom God was well pleased. And then he had spent 40 days in the wilderness working out exactly what that meant for him. Jesus knew who he was, but it still mattered what others thought. Was there anyone who really understood him?

It’s certainly a question that LGBTQ folk deal with on a daily basis. We know the truth of who we are. And we long for acceptance of that identity. Each day has the potential for a new coming out experience and everything that goes along with it. What do others think about us? What would they think if they really knew who we were?

Some folks described Jesus as another John the Baptist, possibly because of the large crowds that he attracted. Some thought he might be Elijah come back to earth, maybe because of the miracles he performed. Others thought he was one of the prophets, who had also blasted the religious and political powers of their day.

But then Jesus, realizing that no one seemed to have it right, turned to his disciples, his closest companions, and with what I imagine to be a mixture of hope, desperation, and courage, asked them, “But who do you say that I am?”

The whole world can have it wrong, but what matters most is the opinion of those who are closest to us, the ones who are devoted to us and care for us. That’s why some people never get to this question with their closest friends and family members. The possibility of rejection is too much of a risk for them. But for those of us who have had this conversation with our loved ones, we can imagine how Jesus must have felt when he asked the question.

And we also can imagine his joy and relief in hearing Peter’s response, “You are the Messiah.” Some of you may have gathered up your courage to have the difficult coming-out conversation with some important people in your lives, only to have them say, “Yeah, I knew that about you all along.” There’s an immediate rush of delightful freedom that follows. I expect Jesus felt the same thing.

But what did it mean to be the Messiah? The Jewish word “messiah” is translated as “the anointed one.” It was a title that was not specific to Jesus. King David, who delivered his people from oppression and who united the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, was also referred to as a messiah. And the

equivalent word in Greek is “christos,” or “Christ.” So when we say “Jesus Christ,” we are saying Jesus is our Messiah or Savior, he was the one anointed by God.

But so are we. All of us are anointed as God’s own children. And when I say “all of us,” that includes members of the LGBTQ community. We are all anointed. But anointed for what purpose?

Jesus went on to explain what it would mean for him to be the Messiah. He told his disciples that, as the Messiah, he would undergo great suffering, would be rejected, and would even be killed.

And tragically, that’s also what it means to be a lesbian, gay man, bisexual, transgender or queer person in this day and age. The story of rejection is all too familiar to the LGBTQ community. Parents reject their LGBTQ children, classmates bully them, and their faith communities condemn them to hell. And the government? The government denies them the civil rights guaranteed to other people. And last year marked more deaths of transgender people in the U.S. due to fatal violence than ever before. Yes, queer folk know that to be a member of the LGBTQ community means to be at risk of suffering, rejection, and even death.

But this is not what Peter had in mind when he declared Jesus to be the Messiah. Peter, speaking on behalf of the disciples, indeed, speaking on behalf of the first-century audience of Mark’s Gospel, wanted someone to deliver them and lead them into a place of freedom. They had had their fill of suffering; they were ready for liberation.

But Jesus rebukes him, saying Peter’s idea of a Messiah is not necessarily the same as his own idea of what it means to be the Messiah. Jesus defies Peter’s efforts of trying to fit Jesus into a box.

Again, this is something that the LGBTQ community is familiar with. But despite the efforts of others, we have come to know that sexuality is our own to name, explore, and discover how we want and when we want. And our bodies are the gender and sex we say it is. Like Jesus, we defy the expectations and labels others try to impose on us.

But finally, Jesus closes with the bit of wisdom that if anyone hoped to experience complete freedom, they had to lose their lives, let go of the life they had always known. They had to let go of the pretense and lies associated with that life, lay it down, and take up a new life of truth and service to others.

Members of the LGBTQ community who have come out know what it’s like to finally experience a freedom that is complete and whole. We leave behind us the old life that was imprisoned within the closet. We have laid it down and buried it. And if we are looking for purpose in our lives, it is to provide hope for others in our community who need support. We are anointed by God for the purpose of providing hope for others...

When Jesus explained to Peter what it meant to be the Messiah, he said that it would mean suffering, rejection, and death. But there was something else: something that Peter either didn’t hear or was unable to understand. Jesus told Peter that after his death, he would rise again on the third day. Peter was so devastated that Jesus wasn’t the one whom he had hoped would deliver Israel from oppression, he never heard the part about the resurrection.

But that’s the good news for you and me. Whatever happens to us – despite the rejection and suffering that we may endure, regardless of how many laws are enacted against us, no matter how many of us are taken out by violence, the good news is that we will rise again...and again...and again. God’s Spirit abides in us, giving us the strength and courage to rise up, despite the odds. That strength and courage is manifested in others who affirm us as God’s own anointed children, beloved by God, in whom we find favor.

I don’t believe the author of Mark’s Gospel had LGBTQ people in mind when this morning’s text was written. But it speaks to the gay man in me nonetheless. It tells me that Jesus experienced what I have experienced. But at the end of the day there is hope. There is hope in the resurrected Christ. And if that’s not good news for a weary soul, I don’t know what is. Amen.