

Who Do You Say That I Am?

September 17, 2006

(Pentecost 15 - Year B)

Mark 8: 27-38

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

In this last week, two gifts plopped right into my lap.

First, on Tuesday morning, I went out to my front yard to pick up the newspaper, and when I opened up the paper, the headline said:

“Drawing A More Detailed Picture of God.”¹

The newspaper article was about the release of a new research study by Baylor University about religious life in America.²

The second gift I received this week happened when I got home on Tuesday evening, opened my mailbox and found this week's issue of Time magazine.

The cover of Time magazine says:

“Does God Want You to Be Rich?”³

Immediately, in the course of just one single day, in the newspaper and in a magazine, I was given gifts:

Gifts of sermon material, sermon material to be richly mined in conversation with today's Gospel reading.

For both The Baylor Religion Survey and Time magazine are still asking the question that Jesus posed to his disciples over 2,000 years ago.

Jesus asks his followers:

“Who do people say that I am?”

And, the answer according to The Baylor Religion Survey, is that we do not worship just one type of God, but that we worship 4 different types of Gods.

These categories, according to the Baylor Survey, depend upon whether

¹ *Waco Tribune-Herald*, September 12, 2006

² <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf>

³ *Time Magazine*, September 18, 2006

you feel that God is heavily engaged in the world or if God is rather distant.

These categories depend upon whether or not you feel that God is angry or lenient with humans.

The Baylor Survey ended up with America's Four Gods:

1. Authoritarian God - who is heavily engaged and angry and punishing
2. Benevolent God - who is active in our lives and less likely to punish or condemn
3. Critical God - who is not very active in the world, but still is angry with the human race
4. Distant God - who is not engaged in our daily lives, but is not angry about our behavior either.

And, according to the Study, America is fairly evenly split on these 4 views of God.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus asks his followers:

“Who do people say that I am?”

And the disciples answer him:

“According to 1,721 Americans polled in the Baylor Religion Survey, Some say that you are an Authoritarian God, some say you are a Benevolent God, and then some say you are Critical, and others say you are Distant.”

But, then Jesus asks them:

Yes, “but who do *you* say that I am?”

Then, Peter gives his wonderful and faithful confession, replying to the Jesus survey question by answering:

“You are the Messiah.”

Then Jesus begins to teach the disciples about what kind of God he is: That he must undergo great suffering and rejection, be killed, and then rise again.

But, Peter takes Jesus aside and argues with Jesus.

Then, Jesus makes his come back to Peter:

“Get behind me, Satan!

For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human

things.”

So, you see, I find myself scratching my head when I read the extensive and expensive Baylor Religion Study, to find that nowhere in this study does it identify Jesus to be the God whom he says that he himself is!

I find myself asking:

Where is the category for Crucified God?

Jesus does not say that God is Authoritarian, Benevolent, Critical, or Distant!

Jesus says that God is Suffering,

God is Rejected,

God is Killed,

God is Risen.

The God of the Gospels is the Crucified God, who suffers, who is rejected, who is killed.

And, we who follow this God, must walk in God’s footsteps.

For Jesus says:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it,

And those who lose their life, for the sake of the [good news], will save it.”

Which brings me to the cover on this week’s issue of Time magazine.

The cover of Time magazine says;

Does God Want You To Be Rich?

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus asks his disciples:

“Who do people say that I am?”

And, the disciples answer him:

“According to an article in Time magazine, some people say that you are a God of Prosperity and Riches.”

Now, let me read you some of the quotes from this Time magazine

article:

Kirbyjon Caldwell, megachurch Methodist minister says:

“God wants you to own land.

The entire Old Testament is all about land.

Land represents that God is with you and God has blessed you.”

Joel Osteen, the megapastor and author from Houston says:

“I think God wants us to be prosperous.

I think he wants us to be happy...

I think God wants us to send our kids to college.”

And finally, Joyce Meyer, the popular TV preacher says:

“Who would want some [religion] where you’re miserable, broke and ugly and you have to muddle through until you get to heaven?”

Now, my friends, if I place all those words from these nationally-known preachers up next to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as told in Mark, then I find a disconnect.

From these preachers, I hear that God is a God of landowners and riches and good looks and prosperity and happiness.

But, from Jesus’ own words I hear that God is a God of suffering, rejection, death, self-denial and loss, a crucified God on the Cross.

For, to me, the categories of God as Authoritarian, Benevolent, Critical, or Distant omit the most important attributes of God that we see on the Cross of Jesus Christ:

The attributes of sacrifice and self-denial and self-giving love.

To me, we are running the risk of making a self-serving American God, who is interested only in me-me-me,

A God who is our fairy godmother, who doles out wealth and jobs and land and good looks and college educations only to those whom God favors.

And, the risk is:

When you worship the Authoritarian God or the Critical God or the Prosperity God,

Then, where is the gospel?

Where is the good news, when you find yourself to be poor and unemployed and disabled and untalented and addicted and ugly?

For Jesus, time and time again, allies himself, not with the rich and the powerful and those who try to put God into 4 categories.

Jesus, time and time again, allies himself with the powerless, the outcast, the miserable, the broke, the ugly and those who muddle through life on the way to the Cross.

For, when we identify with Jesus, who is the Crucified God,
Then, Jesus identifies with us - and saves us.⁴

Do you want to follow a God formed out of your own image of power and success and wealth?

Or, do you have the guts to deny yourself, take up the cross and follow the Crucified God?

Jesus is looking for an answer:

“Who do *you* say that he is?”

AMEN.

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⁴ From Synthesis, by the Rev. H. King Oehmig