

What about Jesus?
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Today's gospel reading started me wondering about Jesus. Not the first time I've wondered about Jesus. Since I was 12 years old and walked alone to the front of the church to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I've been wondering about Jesus. Plus, in the decades of my priesthood, probably most of the spiritual conversations I've had with others have been about Jesus. God as Creator and God as Holy Spirit seem to be easier for people, including me, to talk about, describe and relate to. But this Jesus... What to make of Jesus? And in a close look at today's reading from Mark, we can see our question has been around since the beginning.

In these 13 verses, Mark presents many titles and roles for Jesus. First, Jesus is teacher. He takes the traditional male role on a sabbath morning in his hometown. Astonishment fills the room. Where does his wisdom come from? Who is this guy who teaches with authority and does works of power with his own hands? Apparently, they had him figured out and now their picture isn't quite so tidy. His teaching offends them. They are challenged with a new understanding of him.

Then, quickly, Mark tells us that Jesus offers another title: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." In the space of a usual Saturday service of prayer, Jesus offers several ways to understand who he has grown up to be. Then, Jesus cures a few sick people. What about Jesus? Teacher. Prophet. Healer.

But, those are titles. When we keep reading closely, Mark shows us what to make of Jesus beneath the obvious titles and expected roles. Mark tells us Jesus comes "proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Such an announcement is layered with meanings. Discovering who Jesus is requires unpacking. Jesus has things to say and do that require more than a fleeting experience of him. So, he intentionally gathers a community around him so relationships can be created and deepen. He is no "one-man teacher, prophet and healer" show.

Jesus is on a journey which could simply appear as a physical journey from village to village. Yet, Jesus is really taking his followers on the journey of deep inner transformation and change. He gives them a message in one word: repent. Or in Greek: metanoia - stretch your usual way of taking in the world around you, go beyond your own small, egoic ways of perceiving yourself, others and God. Change not just what you see, but how you see. "Take nothing for the journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts." Jesus instructs his followers to strip themselves of conscious and unconscious layers of protection. He wants them to be more aware of their deep connection and dependence on others. Be vulnerable in relationships, even with strangers. Experience the basic and true reality of life as abundant, yes even more so, possible because of the wholeness of life sustaining us.

Open yourselves to this raw truth, and become naked, as it were, without all the trappings of various titles, roles and biases. Vulnerability and trust are the first steps to enter the kingdom of God - which makes sense out of Jesus' directions to the disciples. "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you

leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as testimony against them.” A warning against the tendency to close off others, refuse to listen or welcome or honor others’ dignity and need. Jesus knows first hand of the profound consequences when love’s power is closed off.

Like Jesus, followers are also in God’s flow of life and wholeness. That’s why openness to the “other” is so central to Jesus’ message and life. Whether as teacher, prophet or healer, Jesus is about creating that same wholeness for everyone. He has been called a “wholemaker” “W-hole”. (The Unbearable Wholeness of Being by Ilia Delio, p. 131). Wholeness is at his core, fed by his own wholeness with God.

From the beginning, Jesus invites others to believe that the same flow of healing love is with them. It’s never just about him. That’s why Jesus sends out the disciples - then and now - and gives us the same connection with God’s flow of love. We are also called to be open to the “other”. Jesus sends us to enter the closed places within ourselves and in our communities where God’s love can’t flow. Jesus calls us to radical openness.

A contemporary Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf grounds Jesus’ message in his description of an embrace. “Open arms are a gesture of the body reaching for the other. They are a sign of discontent with my own self-enclosed identity and a code of desire for the other. I do not want to be myself only; I want the other to be part of who I am and I want to be part of the other.” Open arms create “space in myself for the other to come in and I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other.” In order for the embrace not to cancel itself, arms must open again. For each embrace holds the mystery of the other, an acceptance of the other as a question and gift. (The Unbearable Wholeness of Being by Ilia Delio, p. 134)

It is no surprise that Volf, as a Christian, extends our experience of an embrace to our experience of the Eucharist. He writes, “The Eucharist is the ritual time in which we celebrate this divine making-space-for-us-and-inviting-us-in.... Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in—even our enemies.” (Delio - p. 191)

Here, I believe we come to an answer about Jesus - an answer held in our open hands.

Jesus is God embracing everyone on the Cross.

Jesus is God leading us to offer such an embrace to others.

Jesus is God extending to all creation in time by the resurrection.

Jesus is God leading us to create a space within ourselves for others.

From a hole created by an embrace comes wholeness.

Amen