

Marketing the Messiah

Mark 8: 27-37

More than anything else, Jesus taught people about the *The Kingdom of God* (also called *The Kingdom of Heaven*). Sometimes we call it *the reign of God* or even *the mind of God*. This sermon has been prompted by a question: “How do we bring the *Kingdom of God* to earth if we don’t know what that looks like and how to do it?” Let me ask you to consider how you would know *The Kingdom of God* if you saw it? What’s it look like? Then, how would you bring it to earth? What are some ways for us to actually reveal it in life here and now?

What makes these questions so compelling for us is the realization that it is exactly what Jesus was doing throughout his ministry. In the Mark 8 passage, he asked his disciples, “who do people say that I am?” After the usual answers, he asked the dreaded follow-up question, “who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter was right on it. He said, “You are the Messiah!” “And you are absolutely right,” responded Jesus. “Now, Rocky Johnson (that’s what the name *Peter* meant and he was the son of John), I don’t want you to breathe a word of this to anyone -- not one word!”

Jesus had obviously never taken a marketing course. He didn’t seem to realize that the object is to let people know about you – who you are and what you’re doing! And if you’re the *Chosen One*, the *Anointed One*, the *Messiah*, that would be big news! You have to make it appealing so people will follow you.

But Jesus told the crowd, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. No, Jesus clearly did not understand marketing. The character Judas in the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* was right when he sang:

You’d have managed better if you’d had it planned.
Why’d you choose such a backward time and such a strange land?
If you’d come today you would have reached the whole nation.
Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication!

Even the disciples tried to correct Jesus’ approach. Simon “Rock” Johnson in the *Cotton Patch Gospel* undoubtedly would have helped Jesus be more effective in reaching his marketing goals: “You’ve just got to cut out all this lynching nonsense. We’ve got your takeover all planned....” Then he proceeded to describe the media blitz and the effort at political organizing to get Jesus’ peace initiative adopted into law, but Jesus just wasn’t *too keen* on such an approach.

The early Christian Church saw Jesus as the Messiah. He was not a military Messiah, but was definitely all about *The Kingdom of Heaven*, the new age of God. What the disciples and many others could never quite grasp is that this kingdom is not a place or an entity of any kind. It is more of a perspective from which to see life or an attitude with which to approach living. But it is hard perspective and a difficult attitude. It’s like trying to live life trying to go upstream. Jesus even likened it to being crucified every day. *The Kingdom of God* is all about seeing from a different perspective. It is a different vision for life and tying ourselves to that vision regardless

of how hard the journey is, even if it feels like taking up your cross every day and walking through your life.

Jesus had a clear vision of this Kingdom. It was how life really worked. It is a reality marked by values that are very different from those of the cultures in which we live. He emphasized compassion over efficiency, justice over expediency, peace over domination, and love over all. The message of Jesus' life and teaching gives us an opportunity to see the deeper and alternative reality he was seeing. And he challenges us to embrace that reality and construct our lives based on it. The implications are significant!

Jesus challenged those in power in his day in terms of their legitimacy and their values. Faith calls us to challenge the values often assumed by the powerful and privileged of our own time. Theologian Walter Wink writes: "Jesus does not condemn ambition or aspiration; he merely changes the values to which they are attached. The Gospel of Jesus champions economic equality. The earth, he insists, is so constituted that it will provide all our needs if, and only if, we share equitably: 'Seek first the reign of God and God's justice, and all these things (necessities of life) will be given to you as well.'" (*Engaging the Powers*, 111-114).

Jesus went out of his way to include the outcasts and lift up those who were down and out. He challenged policies that perpetuated oppression of the poor. All of this reflects what the Gospels call *The Kingdom of God*. According to Jesus, and in the prophetic tradition of Israel, God values our sharing wealth and resources, having compassion for those in pain, exercising leadership by serving others, and working for equal access to the opportunities of society for all people.

So how can we bring *The Kingdom of God* into this world? What can one person do? What can you do? I am reminded that one person can change a room and, by extension, the world – at least a small part of it. But how?

To change the world you need to dream, to awaken your mind to the reality of God's presence in you and around you. And you need to live each day based on what you are discovering. Invest your time, talents, and treasures in doing what is most important to you. Let the values of *The Kingdom of God* guide your actions. You might be thinking, "How can I do all these things. It's too confusing and frustrating." And it can be! It can feel confusing and frustrating, but I'm convinced the biggest impediment to discovering and doing what Jesus calls us to is not that we don't know what to do. It is that we sense what a significant commitment he was demanding. It's that we do understand what living this way will mean for us and it gives us pause.

If we accept Jesus' vision of *The Kingdom of God*, it will have huge implications for how we live our lives. We'll use the fruit of our achievements to benefit not only ourselves and those we love, but the general good of our society and of strangers, even people we don't like. We'll give our quiet gifts of support and comfort generously. We'll recognize the shared nature of our spiritual journey; that part of our relationship with God is our relationship with others. The challenge of God's Kingdom is to see the world in that radical way Jesus did and adjust our lives accordingly. It is hard walk this road, but the Bible promises that we can do it because God's presence will always surround and fill us - always faithful.

One person can do a lot by getting involved with other people and in organizations that are doing the sorts of things you want to be doing with your life, an organization that is putting into practice what *The Kingdom of God* means to you. One local organization is MORE², the Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity. Several of us here at Crossroads Church are involved and the whole congregation is a member faith community. MORE² is communities of faith working to change those policies of government and those practices of business and industry that maintain a *status quo* in which a few get wealthy while many get progressively poorer. Work with organizations that improve access to the opportunities of society. Part of that change is access to nutritious food, affordable healthcare, good quality education, and employment with a future.

What can this congregation do, specifically, to bring *The Kingdom of God* into this world? What can one congregation do? What can we do? We can make the most of our involvement in MORE² and work to ensure access to the benefits and opportunities of this society for all people regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, national origin, religious affiliation, or socio-economic status.

We can invest ourselves in building and growing our community here at Crossroads – not just bringing in new people, but to come to our community meetings and participate in the process of shaping our future together – learning to listen to each other and build a community in the Spirit. We can redouble our efforts to teach people how to pray and meditate, to opening themselves to the living presence of God in and around us. We can continue to encourage people to walk the journey of faith, bringing questions and sharing wisdom. We can commit ourselves to be good stewards of this global environment: to practice and work for green energy and ecologically friendly ways of conducting our institutional life. We can commit ourselves to work for peace by helping develop non-violent solutions to conflicts between people and between nations – peace for the whole creation. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote:

The divine goodness cannot be adequately represented by one creature alone. Therefore, God produced many and diverse creatures so that what was lacking in one in the representation of this great divine goodness might be supplied by another. The whole universe together participates in the divine goodness and represents it better than any single creature could by itself. (*Summa Theologica*)

Father Richard Rohr adds, “Once you recognize how to see the divine goodness in one creature, pretty soon it universalizes and you recognize the Presence in all creatures.” (Richard Rohr, *Great Chain of Being*) As a congregation, Crossroads Church can raise this vision for all people, that God is present in all creatures, in every person – present and yet not limited by our humanity.

You and I stand in one of history’s defining moments. Greed and fear are running rampant in our society sending us the message that we cannot afford a justice that embraces all and seeks equity for everyone. Greed and fear are running rampant through the church, telling us that the vision Jesus had of *The Kingdom of God* is just not practical when it comes to non-violence, to sharing the world’s resources, and to embracing all people as one in God. But we can challenge those messages. We can confront that greed and fear with our message that we’re only wealthy when everyone has enough. We’re only secure when no one needs to fear. We’re only whole when all are included and we’re only safe when we know we are accepted and loved.

The Spirit is calling us here and now to stand up for the vision Jesus showed us, calling us to stand up as persons for this attitude the Spirit offers us. God is calling us to stand up as a congregation to live with the courage and wisdom the Creator has placed within us: to take up our cross and follow Jesus, to bring justice, compassion, light, and love, and to bring *The Kingdom of God* to earth through our lives in Jesus' name.