

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday, September 23, 2018**

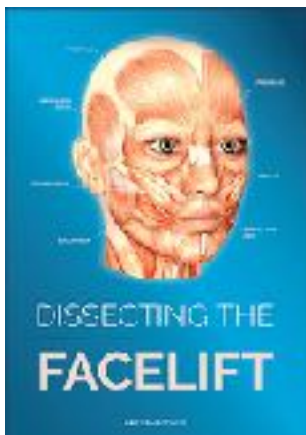
“The Morphing of ‘Messiah’”

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 50:4-9a

Christian Scripture: Mark 8:27-38

Let me begin and end my message this morning by relating to you two amusing cases of ‘mistaken identity’.

A middle aged woman had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. While on the operating table she had a near-death experience. During that experience she saw God and asked if this is ‘it’. God said ‘no’ and explained that she has another thirty to forty years to live.



Upon her recovery, she decided to just stay in the hospital and have a face-lift, liposuction, breast augmentation, and a tummy tuck. She even had someone come-in and change her hair color. She

figured that since she had another thirty or forty years, she might as well make the most of it.

However as soon as she walked out the hospital after the last operation, she was killed by an ambulance speeding-up to the hospital. She arrived in front of God again and asked, "I thought you said I had another thirty to forty years?" God replied, "Sorry, I didn't recognize you".



Mistaken identity. It happens every now and then.

One wonders, in our scripture reading, if Jesus was confused about his identity. He asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" The response may surprise us. The disciples start rattling-off names! John the Baptist. Elijah. One of the prophets. During the Transfiguration, we remember, a union of Moses was also suggested. Then Peter blurted out, as he so often did, "You are 'the Messiah'". Jesus then freaks-out a little bit and orders the disciples to keep shut their mouths about his identity.



There is a great deal about this scripture that causes us to question. Was Jesus so confused about who he was that he needed the input of others? How can Jesus possibly be mistaken for so many people? Did the Jews believe in reincarnation? What is it about the word ‘Messiah’ that caused Jesus to cut-off the conversation and swear the disciples to secrecy? Was Jesus ashamed, or afraid? All of these are great questions. And they are questions that can be explored with a little history.

Language changes. When I listened to Tony [Grobe] speak in “The Tempest,” yoh, I struggled! That Shakespeare! The meanings of words change. After the service, I want to you tell your child or grandchild, “Yoh! Reverend Scott’s sermon this morning was SICK!” In the right context, ‘sick’ does not mean ‘sick’ anymore.



Jesus understood the shifting plate tectonics over the word ‘Messiah’ and this explains Jesus’ alarm and command for the disciples to keep the discussion to themselves.



You see, the word Messiah had a history, and Jesus knew it.

‘Messiah’, literally, in Hebrew simply meant ‘anointed’.¹ Anointed, or ‘blessed’. Anointed with what, you ask? Oil. (Not motor oil. Olive oil.) Because Hebrew kings were anointed with oil during their coronations. They were kinda considered ‘messiahs’. This definition expanded to even include a pagan king. In the book of Isaiah, the Persian king, Cyrus, is called a ‘messiah’ for allowing the Hebrews to return from exile and re-settle in Jerusalem (45:1).

Some priests were anointed, thus making them ‘messiahs’ (Exodus 29:7 and Zechariah 4:14). There was once a priest who was *also* a king, Melchizedek, and he was anointed (Genesis 14:8).

¹ Metzger, Bruce and Micahel Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 513-514.

Sometimes prophets were anointed (Isaiah 61:1). This prophetic messiah was to “bring good news to the oppressed”. And some traditions have the prophet suffering, because he is rejected and persecuted by his own people as was so often the case. Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah are good examples of this. So, the term ‘Messiah’ was disputed terrain. It meant priest, prophet, and most importantly, it meant, overall and in general, ‘king’.

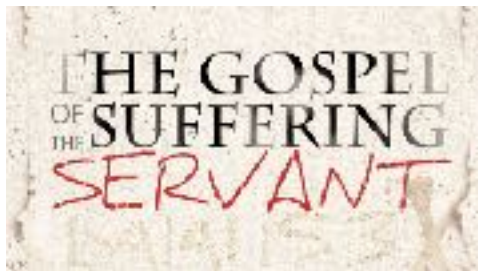
Now, remember, ultimately, the charge that led the Romans to crucify Jesus was their claim that he claimed, or rather some people claimed, that he was ‘King of the Jews’. Hence, it can be argued that Jesus did not want to short-circuit his ministry by attracting the authorities’ attention for his committing the crime of treason.



Friends in Christ, many people had many ideas of who they wanted Jesus to be. They wanted Jesus to be Moses, who would defeat Pharaoh, now Caesar. They wanted Jesus to be the prophet Elijah who would confront Herod, just as Ahab was. They wanted Jesus to be a priest/king, like Melchizedek, a theological/political

leader who would be a cosmic go-between God and God's chosen people. They wanted Jesus to be a political savior, mixing government with religion. Jesus was to be a ruler king who vanquished their enemies. Some wished for Jesus to be a Zealot, a revolutionary military general, one who with an army would rise-up and rebel using violence as a means to rule.

Jesus on the other hand mined the depths of the Hebrew scriptures and did not choose to be a king (though he was a spiritual king); he did not chose to be a priest (though he was a *rabbi*); he did not chose to be a prophet (though he spoke against the status quo and truth to power); and did not chose to be a military general through the cult of personality or violence. No.



What kind of messiah did Jesus chose to be? 'A Suffering Servant'. Let us read from our Hebrew scripture: "I gave my back to those who struck me and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting" (Isaiah 50:6).

To this Peter objected. "Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him" (Mark 8:32). To which Jesus responded, "Get behind

me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things” (Mark 8:33).

What does all this mean for me, for us? Well, we all have multiple identities, most of the identities are what Thomas Merton refers to as ‘False Selves’.² We have identifiers. They could be our occupations, or our demographic or the specific role we carry in any particular family relationship. I am a king (with two employees). I am a teacher or academic. I have certain conceptions of myself as a priest and prophet (many of them perhaps inflated and egotistical). As a U.S. citizen, I pay my taxes to support the military, so I am by default a militarist. I am White. I am economically and socially privileged. These are all conceptions of me and they are often affirmed by others.



But none of them identify me as made in the image of God and none of them indicate that God dwells within me through Jesus Christ - what Thomas Merton referred to as the ‘True Self’. This is about

² Craig, Robert. “True Self-False Self: The Educational Theory of Thomas Merton”, *Journal of Thought*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall 1994), pp. 51-59.
Published by: [Caddo Gap Press](https://www.jstor.org/stable/42589385), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42589385>

what Jesus spoke (Mark 8:35) when he said that we must lose our lives (the 'false selves'), our superficial lives, to save our lives ('our true selves'), for the sake of the gospel.³

What if, what if we at Centre Congregational Church chose to be 'suffering servants' for this community, nation and world? What if we, together in this church, chose to leave those identities others have chosen for us or those identities we chosen for ourselves and instead chose to "deny ourselves" and "lose our lives for the sake of the gospel"? What would it look like if I, if you, chose to be a 'suffering servant'?



I'm not completely sure. Why am I not sure? Because, I am not there yet. Perhaps we can get there together.

Now for that second story: A cautious driver was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the prudent

³ Richard Rohr, "True Self False Self", Center for Action and Contemplation, Podcast, 19 March 2018.

thing, and stopped at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman hit the roof, and the horn, and screamed in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection with him. While still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked-up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands-up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. The policeman escorted her back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. He said to her, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled-up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping-off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car".



Mistaken identity: It happens every now and then.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded: “Amen”!