

**“Do We Get Him?”**  
**Mark 8:31-38**  
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By now, most of us have seen the “He Gets Us” ads that aired during the Super Bowl and are aware of the debate surrounding them. Though some people like them, they have received equal criticism from liberals and conservatives — the former saying the people behind them don’t believe their message and are engaging in a bait and switch where they will lure people in with compassion and then beat them over the head with judgment; the latter saying the Jesus represented in the ads is too soft on sin. I received an email this week from a conservative group lambasting the ad which says, “Jesus doesn’t judge, he washes feet.” This misrepresents Jesus, the email said, assuming I would agree...

There is validity in some arguments from both perspectives, though one has to wonder if some of these well-meaning Christians have ever read the Bible. But I have been more intrigued by the response of Eric Folkerth in an article posted on Baptist News Global. He addresses the debate and its varied arguments, but then suggests a more helpful theme for an ad campaign — He Gets Us, But Almost None of Us Gets Him. No matter how Jesus views us, whether we think he gets us or not, we might want to ask, “Do we get him?” Do we understand who Jesus is and thus who he calls us to be? We are in church, we call ourselves Christians, and we think of ourselves as his followers, but do we get him, really understand who he is and what he is about?

Peter certainly does not in our reading from Mark 8, and he is one of Jesus’ closest friends and earliest disciples. Just before our reading begins, Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is and then who they think he is. We know this story. It takes place at Caesaria Philippi north of Lake Galilee, modern day Banias, the site of altars to many ancient gods, including the ancient Greek god of the wild, Pan. It is the perfect place for Jesus to ask his disciples who they believe he is.

“Here are all these altars to various gods with followers of various beliefs,” Jesus says, “In view of all this, what do you believe about me?” Peter, as we recall, immediately says, “You are the Messiah,” whereupon Jesus sternly instructs them not to tell anyone about him.

It is not very evangelical of him... scholars call this “the messianic secret” because Jesus doesn’t seem to want his identity disclosed, at least not at this point. “Why not?” we may wonder. Because they don’t have a clue who he is. Peter may seem to get Jesus, he *is* the Messiah, but Peter doesn’t understand *what kind* of Messiah. Like every other faithful Jew in this time, Peter thinks of a holy leader who will free the people from Roman oppression, a strong and powerful righteous man, and Jesus seems to be strong and powerful and righteous. And he is... but not in the ways Peter and the others expect.

All of this is made abundantly clear in our reading today. As we pick up the story, Jesus proceeds to tell those in his inner circle who he is. He will undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days, rise again. This is the kind of Messiah he is. Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him. He doesn’t fall on the ground and laugh, as Abraham does in responding to God’s ridiculously hilarious proclamation that Sarah will bear a child in her nineties. But he does get in Jesus’ face and say, “No way! That is not what a Messiah does!”

Peter does not get Jesus at all. So, Jesus rebukes Peter and says to him, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Then, he goes on to describe in more detail who he is and what it means to follow him. It involves denying self and taking up a cross. Peter does not get this, not now, not even when Jesus is dying on a cross and he denies knowing him three times. In John’s account, he gets upset when the resurrected Jesus asks him three times if he loves him, but he shouldn’t be upset with Jesus. He has been slow to comprehend every step of the way. He struggles to get Jesus, to understand who he really is and what he is about.

But then, so do we. Part of the challenge is that there is so much to know and understand. An untold number of books have been written about

Jesus, and yet, in each new generation, more books are written, many of them contributing much to our shared understanding of Jesus. They are written by Christian scholars like Margus Borg, biblical scholars like Bart Ehrman, Jewish Scholars like Amy-Jill Levine, Muslims or former Muslims like Reza Aslan, and the list goes on and on.

Some books are academic, some are more personal, many are deeply spiritual. They explore questions about Jesus' humanity and divinity, what we know historically and through scripture, whether he was an apocalypticist or not. There is ever more to learn and understand, and this is a good thing because it points to the scope of the influence of this one man on human history and to our curiosity about him, but it also means there are things we still don't get. Jesus is a bit like the Cat in the Hat in that no matter what we see him do, he can always say, "But that is not all I can do; no, no; that is not all!"

But it's not just that there is always more to know and understand; it's that we have preconceived ideas about who Jesus is that conflict with who he really is. Or to put it another way, there are specific things we want in our Jesus that don't match the Jesus of scripture.

For example, in the white American church, we see Jesus as a blond-haired, blue-eyed white guy with his hair parted in the middle because this reflects who we are, and this is the image we saw of Jesus on a Sunday School poster growing up. On one level this is okay because people all over the world see Jesus in their image as the beautiful Christmas song written by Alfred Burt and Wihla Hutson "Some Children See Him" makes clear. But if we really think the historical Jesus looked like this, we are misinformed. And if we have a desperate need for the historical Jesus to look like this, we have deeper problems.

One contemporary scholar has said that any church that has images of a white Jesus has a problem with race. Please don't have coronary failure right here. I am not suggesting we remove all such images. But it is worth reflecting on how we see Jesus, what informs this image, and how this image shapes our beliefs and practices.

But our preconceived ideas go beyond what Jesus looks like. In her book *Jesus and John Wayne* Kristin Kobes Du Mez documents the movement to find a more muscular Jesus which began over a hundred years ago but has

had a resurgence in recent years. The initial concern was with views of masculinity, as the status of women improved. And if one wanted a rougher, tougher view of men, it was helpful to have a rougher, tougher Jesus, since the majority of people were Christian.

The latter is no longer true today, but many evangelicals still want a rougher, tougher Jesus. Many preachers have preached on the beatitudes and included “Blessed are the meek...” in the sermon, only to have a congregant ask, “Where did you get those liberal talking points?” When the preacher has pointed out that these were the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew, part of the Sermon on the Mount, the response has been something like, “Well... that stuff doesn’t work anymore.”

To be fair, while some have a distorted view of Jesus as a spiritual Arnold Schwarzenegger character, others have an equally distorted view of him as a passive flower child who does away with all rules. John’s prologue says Jesus comes bringing grace *and* truth. In that same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says explicitly that he has come not to do away with the law but to fulfill it. And the way Jesus confronts the scribes and Pharisees about their hypocrisy is just one of many instances where Jesus does not simply say, “Anything goes,” and walk away.

We all have flawed ideas and assumptions, we all want to remake Jesus according to our preferences, and in fact, do in our functional Christology. And there are things Jesus says and does in scripture that make us all scratch our heads or turn red in embarrassment. For example, why does Jesus talk in such an ugly way to the Canaanite woman? Why does he say he has come only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel when he reaches out to Gentiles (Matthew 15:21-28)?

Some passages have to be interpreted and understood alongside other passages, indeed, alongside the entire biblical witness to Jesus, how the church has experienced him, and how we have experienced him. But all of this simply points to the challenge of understanding Jesus. We can pick and choose passages to support our biases, but if we want to see him for who he is, get him and his calling in our lives, we have to be more disciplined in our approach to scripture and the whole process of discernment. We have to pray for the Spirit’s guidance. And we have to consider Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection — all are important.

When Civil Rights historian Taylor Branch spoke here some years ago, he told a story about one of the first large interracial ministers' meetings. The group appointed one white preacher and one black preacher for the occasion, and the white preacher, whose name I don't remember, delivered a sermon on Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for the salvation of the world. The black preacher was Vernon Johns, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s predecessor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

Johns, who was a feisty character, had planned a sermon, but when he heard the white preacher's sermon, it bugged him, not because he didn't believe in the traditional view that Jesus died for our sins, but because he found this focus odd for the occasion. So, he changed his plans and began by saying, "Why is it you white people always want to talk about a dead Jesus and never want to talk about his life?"

Again, all three parts of the Jesus story are critical — life, death, and resurrection. But sometimes it is easier to talk just about his death because we focus on what we receive — forgiveness — as opposed to talking about his life wherein we encounter teachings on what we are called to give — love, forgiveness, service, money, even our lives.

When we start talking about Jesus' life, and pay attention to his teachings, we realize that getting him involves more than understanding his character and accepting his love. It involves following his example, becoming more and more like him.

In that story in John where the resurrected Jesus upsets Peter by asking him three times if he loves him, after which Peter says he does, what does Jesus' say? Feed my sheep. Take care of my people. That's what it means to love me. That's what it means to get me.

Theologian Karl Barth was asked to summarize his theology in one sentence. Rather than referencing any of his work, he quoted a song he learned at his mother's knee. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That's a good place to start any conversation about Jesus, and if we only get one sentence, it's a hard one to beat. We get more, Jesus deserves more, but if what we ponder squares with this — Jesus' love for us and our love for others — we are on the right track.