

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 24
September 13, 2009

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 116:1-9
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

This morning, I decided to begin with a quick lesson in Marketing 101. Brand image is a key concept in Marketing 101. Brand image is the concept of connecting a particular product with a particular idea.

It has been estimated that out of all of the advertising dollars spent in the United States – whether it is radio, television, magazines, billboards, newspapers, or internet – more than half of this advertising is not meant to get you to go out to buy the product initially.

Instead, it is meant to get you to associate the product with an idea. It is meant to connect their product with some idea in your mind.

For example, maybe some of you remember the series of television commercials that were shown several years ago featuring Mitsubishi cars. They were a perfect example of this type of advertising. They were all a little bit different, but were basically variations of the same theme.

In every single commercial, there is a Mitsubishi car being driven down the road. The car is always full – there are always four to five people in the car. They are always young, attractive people. They look like they are on the way to some party or other form of entertainment.

They are always listening to music and singing along with that music. They may change the cars and the people in the cars and even change the music playing. But otherwise, the commercial is pretty much the same.

Believe it or not, this commercial isn't meant to make you rush out and buy a Mitsubishi, since you might not even be in the market for a car. What the commercial is trying to do, is to associate Mitsubishi cars in your mind with a particular kind of attitude – youthful, fun-loving, good times with friends, and enjoying life to the fullest.

So maybe, the next time that you are in the market for a car, or maybe the next time you're passing by a Mitsubishi dealership, you will think to yourself; I fancy myself to be youthful and fun-loving. And I fancy myself to be someone who enjoys life and likes to have good times with friends. And so, maybe Mitsubishi is the car for me.

Now, I mention this because when we look at our Gospel story for today, you've got to admit that Jesus is not portraying an image that is going to "sell".

Jesus first asks his disciples this question: "What are people saying about me?" "Who do people say that I am?" It's a marketing question; "What is my image out there?" "How am I selling myself?"

One of the disciples says; "People think that you're Elijah, who has come back again. Elijah was a great miracle worker. He could do amazing things. Jesus, you're doing amazing things. Therefore, you must be Elijah."

Somebody else says; "People are saying that you're John the Baptist who has come back. After all John was a holy man of God – a great man of faith calling people to repent of their sins. You must just be the new and improved John the Baptist."

And then somebody else said; “People think that you are one of the prophets. You are somebody who is wise and knows what God wants to say to the world today. Therefore, you are a wise prophet.”

But then Jesus gets very personal. He says; “But who do you say that I am? Who do you say that I am?”

And then of course Peter replies; “You are the Messiah.” You’re not just any prophet. You are not simply a person from Scriptures who has come back again. You are the Christ.”

However, when Peter said; “You are the Christ,” he didn’t mean the Christ that was promised by God. For he saw Jesus as his own idea of who the Christ should be.

Certainly, we do that in our own lives as well. We all want to create our own idea of who the Christ is. Usually we make Christ into our own images. Think about your view of who Jesus is, and how it is influenced by your own reality. Now you might not say it out right, but you think it.

If you are white, your Jesus is also white. If you are wealthy, your Jesus is wealthy – or at least is not opposed to wealth. If you are a Democrat, your Jesus is a Democrat. If you are a Republican, your Jesus is a Republican.

If you are an American, then certainly Jesus favors America over and above the other countries of the world, especially those who do not subscribe to the American way of life.

If you believe in Capital Punishment, your Jesus also supports that form of justice for those who commit terrible crimes. If you believe in sealing our borders against illegal immigration, your Jesus also believes in protecting our nation from intruders.

If you believe in supporting the woman's right to abortion in all cases, your Jesus is seen as one who exclusively protects the rights of women over the life of an unborn child. You see, we all create Jesus into the one whom we want him to be.

In our story today, we can imagine Peter turning into a marketing consultant, sitting down with Jesus and saying; "Look Jesus, we need to work on your image a bit! You've got some real problems here."

Then Peter starts offering advice. "First of all Jesus, you talk about suffering. You talk about those who follow you will also suffer. Now suffering, I'll admit was a fad a few years ago. People were all into suffering. But that's out. That's not going to fly anymore.

And secondly, this whole thing about being put on trial, where you are going to be declared guilty – where you are going to be convicted and crucified for a crime. You know, that sort of stuff makes you look like you really are a criminal. And you being a criminal is not the image that we are trying to portray here. We are trying to convince people that you are the Messiah.

And furthermore, you say that people need to pick up their cross and follow you. Look, we took that whole cross-bearing idea, and we did some research. We tested cross-bearing with some focus groups, and they gave it a big thumbs down. Cross-bearing is not the way to go."

You see, Peter wanted a Jesus that agreed with him. It is the same with us. If we are truly honest with ourselves, we too try to recreate Jesus into whom we want him to be. We do it because it is easy. We have enough challenges in the world, let alone bearing a cross for Jesus. But that doesn't have to be the case.

A representative of “Teach America” recently visited Duke University. Duke is considered to be extremely prestigious and wealthy among universities. This representative knew that she had a challenging audience.

She stood up in front of the large group and said to them, “I can tell by looking at you that I have probably come to the wrong place.

Somebody told me that this was a BMW campus and I can believe it by just looking at you. I can tell that all of you come from very affluent and successful backgrounds. After all, why would you be on this campus if you were not already successful and heading for successful jobs?

And yet here I stand, hoping to talk one of you into giving away your life in the toughest job you will ever have. I am looking for people to go into the hollows of West Virginia – into the ghettos of South Los Angeles, and teach in some of the most difficult schools in the world. Last year, two of our teachers were killed on the job.

I can tell, just by looking at you that none of you are interested in that. So go on to graduate school, or whatever successful thing you are planning on doing.

But if by chance, some of you just happen to be interested, I’ve got some brochures here. That’s all I have to say. Thank you very much for your time.”

With that, the whole group stood up, pushed up the aisles and ran to the front and fought over the brochures.

You see, people want to be part of something important – something bigger than themselves – even if it costs them.

But I believe the problem today is that we have short-changed Jesus. We have marketed him as someone who thinks like us, talks like us, and acts like us.

And besides that, he wants the same things for us as we want for us. This is what Peter was trying to do. For Peter did not like the cross idea one bit. And how did Jesus reply? Jesus rebuked him and called him Satan!

A Lutheran gift to the Christian faith is the articulation of the “Theology of the Cross.” The Theology of the Cross says that life as a Christian will have pain and suffering. But in the midst of that pain we will find Jesus suffering with us and walking with us through our pain to resurrection on the other side.

For it is in the midst of pain that we experience Jesus most intimately – where our faith grows stronger.

I always find it interesting. Centuries of Christian history have made us very familiar with the idea of a suffering Savior. We accept it. We teach it. We sing about it. We paint pictures and carve carvings of it. We even name cities after it – one just down the coast from us.

Yet, often in the deep recesses of our minds, in our attitudes and actions, we too rebuke him. We too say; “Let it not be so”. For many of us prefer to have an idea of discipleship that leaves the scandal of the crucified Jesus out of it.

But it is only through the cross, and Christ crucified on it, that we can see the true love of God. You see, victory over death comes through the resurrection, but love comes through the cross. Let me say that again. Victory over death comes through the resurrection, but love comes through the cross.

I sometimes say to people; “God loves you so much that if you were the only person left on earth, Jesus would have come to die on the cross for you.” And I truly believe that with all of my heart.

I know that this message of the cross is not easy to market. It does not promise that our lives on earth will be filled with health, wealth and happiness. For that's an easy message to sell. Remember the Mitsubishi ads.

We see this kind of marketing every day. We even see it in many churches. All you need is a marketing budget and a clever slogan.

But I believe that there is more to faith than that. We may lose our health, but Jesus is there holding our hand. We may grieve our losses in life, but Jesus is crying along with us.

We may not be happy with the way our lives are going, but Jesus gives us tremendous joy knowing that we are loved unconditionally. We may even be called to bear the burdens of the cross in our life, but Jesus is walking along side of us carrying the load when it becomes too heavy.

I don't know about you. But this is the Jesus that I call Lord. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.