

“Jesus is not our buddy”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Church – Toano, VA
2nd Sunday of Lent
Mark 8:31-38

When I was in seminary, a classmate of mine introduced me to his favorite movie, *Dogma*. In this movie is a scene in which George Carlin plays Cardinal Glick, who is unveiling a new image of Jesus for his movement, Catholicism Wow. He explains that many people find the Church and the Bible old-fashioned and obsolete. In order to counter that, the church is ushering in a time of renewal. One of the things it’s doing to become more relevant is to retire the crucifix with its “depressing” image of the crucified Jesus. In the movie Glick says, “Christ didn’t come to earth to give us the willies... He came to help us out. He’s a booster.” And then the new image of Jesus is revealed – the Buddy Christ. Buddy Christ smiles and winks, holds one hand in a thumbs up gesture and the other pointing like a gun.

Obviously the scene in the movie is mocking a happy-clappy, feel-good, Jesus is on our side sort of theology. Anyone who worshiped Buddy Christ would have a very difficult time with today’s gospel lesson about suffering and taking up crosses. I wonder, though, if any of us ever subscribe to a subtle version of Buddy Christ theology? If the purpose of Buddy Christ is to be a “booster,” a friendly pal alternative to the Christ of the crucifix, then the accompanying theology might stress Jesus’ humanity, God’s grace, and a focus on Easter with little attention given to Lent or Good Friday.

Buddy Christ might be a friend or “coach” on the journey of life. A person who worships Buddy Christ might feel very close to Jesus, thinking of him as a brother or best friend. This person might leave church feeling comforted and strengthened and humming the lyrics of the Doobie Brothers’ song, “Jesus is just alright with me, Jesus is just alright, oh yeah.” How could you not feel good with Buddy Christ on your side?

It seems that in today’s passage Peter has fallen into the trap, not necessarily of Buddy Christ theology, but of “Messiah who does not suffer” theology. Only a couple of lines before today’s passage, Jesus has asked his disciples who he is, and Peter has come up with the right answer, “You are the Messiah.” He has seen Jesus heal and cast out demons. He has seen Jesus feed the thousands. He has heard Jesus teach in parables and seen him walk on water, calm storms, and even raise a little girl from the dead. Jesus is Messiah. Only, just as Buddy Christ theology doesn’t work, neither does Peter’s image of Messiah. Why?

Buddy Christ is much more accessible than a crucified Christ.

Buddy Christ encourages us and knows we’re doing the best we can.

Buddy Christ doesn’t talk about suffering and death.

Buddy Christ tells us everything is going to be okay.

Likewise Peter’s Messiah is going to come in triumph as a king, overturn the Roman rule and make life better for the Jewish people.

Peter’s Messiah may have a little more dignity and a lot more power than Buddy Christ, but neither one of them see Jesus for who he really is.

Each of them only tells part of the story.

Peter's Messiah will not suffer, be rejected, and be killed. His Messiah will keep on teaching and healing and performing miracles. His Messiah will restore a king of the Davidic line to the throne. His Messiah will rule the world in power and glory. The blind will see and the lame will leap for joy. But there certainly won't be any suffering or rejection involved, much less any killing. Peter's Messiah emphasizes the divine power of Jesus but seems to forget that suffering and death are part of being human.

And what about Buddy Christ? Where is he on Good Friday? Where is Buddy Christ when the good times go sour? Is he still smiling and pointing? Is he still looking on the "bright side of life"? When a loved one dies or when terminal illness descends or when jobs are lost or tornados threaten, how can Buddy Christ be with us in the pain and the fear? Buddy Christ may seem to emphasize the human nature of Jesus, but in truth he only represents one aspect of what it is to be human.

Buddy Christ may be attempting to be intimate with us, but it is a surface level closeness that doesn't approach the kind of inner fellowship that is possible with the real Jesus, nor does it allow space for the "awful reverence" we feel in the presence of God. Though Buddy Christ might be on the spot with a pat on the back and a vigorous hand shake or comforting hug, would he be able to make space for the kind of sacred intimacy that Jesus created on the night of the Last Supper when he washed the feet of his friends? Would he take a calloused, filthy, aching foot and wash it with his hands? Would he be able to do the same thing with the inner wounds and pain deep in the hearts of his believers today? Perhaps Buddy Christ's smile and wink can only cover up the pain without really healing it.

Then there's Peter's Messiah. It's no wonder Jesus rebukes him, saying, "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus has already resisted the temptation of earthly power. He didn't come to overturn the Roman occupation and become the new king of the Jews. He came to save all of God's people from their sin. He came to break the bonds of death, and the only way he could do that was by dying himself and rising again.

Today's passage about suffering, rejection, death, and taking up the cross is a hard one. Who wants to deny themselves when it feels so much better to indulge ourselves? Why would we want to pick up a cross to follow Jesus? Wouldn't it be better for Jesus to pick us up and take care of us? Wouldn't we prefer to have Jesus as our buddy instead of a Jesus who challenges us to follow the way of the cross? Don't we secretly wish that Jesus would come as Peter's Messiah and clean up the whole mess we've made of our world?

Maybe we would prefer a Jesus who doesn't challenge or make demands, who is easy to understand and doesn't say hard things, who doesn't require change and transformation, who can be ignored. Maybe we long for a Jesus who will tell us what we want to hear about ourselves instead of the truth. But that's not the one that we have. The Jesus who died on the cross is demanding and frightening. Following him means that we, too, have to pick up our crosses, knowing that the journey may be perilous. At the very least, we have to make room for the power of the Holy Spirit to work change in our lives. That can be the scariest thing of all. Jesus will not be ignored and will not be put off by our suffering or our pain. He's been there. Buddy Christ hasn't.

As we continue our Lenten journey I invite all of us to reflect on the ways in which we follow Peter instead of Jesus, the ways we fix our thoughts on earthly things, not divine ones, the choices we make to serve our own wills and not God's will. Peter's Messiah might have delivered the Jews from the Romans, and Buddy Christ might have made us feel good, but the crucified and risen Jesus has redeemed our sins and reconciled us to God. He may not be our buddy, but he is our true friend.