

September 16, Ordinary 24B (Mark 8:27-38)

Jesus' lesson in large-hearted theology

by [Bruce G. Epperly](#) in the [August 29, 2018](#) issue

In his spiritual classic *Deep Is the Hunger*, Howard Thurman recounts a mother's response in verse to her son's prayer:

Each night my bonny, sturdy lad
Persists in adding to his, Now I lay me
Down to sleep, the earnest, wistful plea:
"God make me big."
And I, his mother, with a greater need,
Do echo in a humbled, contrite heart,
"God make me big."

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus presents his followers with a big theology, intended to inspire them to become large-hearted people. Jesus' seminar in practical theology aims to awaken them to the relationship between their theological beliefs and their ethical commitments. He invites them to consider their beliefs about God and about his own mission as God's representative—and to consider how these beliefs are connected to their understanding of leadership and power.

Jesus begins in the spirit of Socrates. His question, "Who do people say that I am?" elicits a variety of responses, only a few of which, I suspect, are enumerated in the text. Then Jesus gets personal, reminding his followers that faith is ultimately intimate. We are not saved by other people's beliefs. We find wholeness and vocation in claiming our own theologies and understandings of truth. These must ultimately become personal and relational, even if they are grounded in tradition.

"But, who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks. Perhaps the disciples again provide a variety of responses, before Peter makes his magisterial affirmation: "You are the Messiah."

Like most such affirmations, Peter's declaration is the beginning of their conversation, not the end. Jesus wants his followers to consider the nature of his Messianic vocation. Jesus describes his vision—rooted in the “suffering servant” of Isaiah—by asserting that the Messiah must suffer and be killed. The initially perceptive Peter, still committed to traditional Messianic theologies, denounces this vision, leading to Jesus' rebuke: Peter is focused “not on divine things but earthly things.”

Jesus poses a countercultural understanding of divine power as relational and sacrificial. Alfred North Whitehead asserted that God is the fellow sufferer who understands. Less than two decades later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated that only a suffering God can help. Such visions counter our images of God as all-powerful and all-judging. They also challenge images of a distant and apathetic God, untouched by the pain of the world.

One of my mentors was the process theologian Bernard Loomer. He described two kinds of power: unilateral and relational. Unilateral power builds walls, silences opposition, decides without consultation, and separates the world into us and them. It is willing to destroy the world in order to save a handful of sycophants. Bullying and bloviation characterize unilateral power.

In contrast, relational power leads by empathy, inclusion, listening, and receptivity. It transforms the world by a dynamic process of call and response, of adjusting—as good friends do, and parents—to the experiences of others. God saves the world by love and not coercion, by embrace and not alienation.

Jesus is not finished with his lesson. His words become even more countercultural: discipleship, too, is relational and sacrificial. Our theology ultimately shapes our actions. We become like the gods we image. The worship of a god whose power is unilateral often leads to theological and interpersonal bullying, to prioritizing creeds over relationships, and to the marginalization of the other. This threatening god's followers assume that anyone who opposes their platform is an infidel, unworthy of ethical consideration. Such leaders win the theological and ecclesiastical world at the cost of losing their souls.

Relational visions of God encourage partnership, creativity, and inclusion as avenues for transformation. The quest for truth involves seeking the well-being of all, not a favored few.

Inspired by his embodiment of a relational God, immersed in suffering, Jesus challenges his followers to take up their crosses and embrace the pain of the world. Contrary to the world's focus on individual success, Jesus asserts that those who hang onto their lives will lose them, while those who are willing to lose their lives will experience God's blessing. This is not a matter of martyrdom so much as the choice to jettison the isolated ego in favor of a wider loyalty. Our self-serving attempts at domination lead to losing our souls. Jesus challenges us to become big spirited in our spiritual and relational lives, drawing circles that embrace all creation.

Will Campbell, the only white person at the 1957 founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, scandalized many of his friends when he provided pastoral care for members of the Ku Klux Klan. When a reporter asked why he attended the trial of one parishioner, a former KKK imperial wizard who killed a grocer for selling food to African Americans, Campbell responded, "Because I'm a Christian, Goddammit!" He believed that "if you're gonna love one, you've got to love 'em all."

In God's world, sacrifice brings blessing, and relationship trumps ideology. Losing your isolated, fearful self leads to a world of beloved friends.