

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“JESUS CHRIST, SUPERSTAR!”
Mark 1:29-39
February 5, 2012
9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

In the days of **Jesus Christ, Superstar**, many who loved it, kept its music alive, and made it a commercial success missed the point. My cousin, Carl Anderson, played the role of Judas in both the Broadway version of the play as well as the movie. He agreed that many missed the point. The point has always been that, while we want a Superstar Jesus, as they did in the first century, Jesus will not cooperate. It is not enough that we are disciples of Jesus. We must follow the Jesus of the Gospels.

From the very beginning of Mark’s Gospel we see Jesus avoiding the spotlight by urging those he heals to tell no one about it. It would have been easy to become known only as a healer and miracle worker. Jesus’ primary purpose was to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Do we follow Jesus? Does the church follow Jesus? If the church follows Jesus, it will be different from the world. Where Jesus said no, the church will say no. Where Jesus said yes, the church will say yes.

What does our fascination with superstars and celebrities say about us? It says we may not have achieved self-acceptance. We fantasize about being more talented or more beautiful or more powerful. It says our chief value may be success, but understood superficially. The rock star with literally everything being placed at his feet, the beautiful actress constantly surrounded by photographers, the CEO making billion-dollar deals, these are our images of success.

We sometimes forget that Jesus, who was so thoroughly rejected at the end, had known a rather lengthy period of popularity. The irony is, however, that the period of his popularity was almost as painful to him as the days of his rejection. Nearly all of the different reactions to Jesus were based on misunderstandings. He made

striking first impressions. He appeared to be the perfect answer to many people's problems. Everyone thought he showed great promise. But, he proved to be a disappointment. ***"He came unto his own, and his own received him not."*** (Jn 1:11)

The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus in the spotlight, and the light stays on him. He is baptized by John in the Jordan River. He is openly endorsed by his heavenly Father. He conquers temptation in the wilderness. He enters Galilee proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand, and begins recruiting disciples. In the synagogue at Capernaum Jesus astonishes the people with his teaching, and heals a man who is demon-possessed. He goes home with Simon and heals Simon's mother-in-law. Then, at sundown, the sick and possessed of Capernaum come in great numbers and he provides healing. The next day the people would have given him anything he asked. But, apparently depleted, he has retreated to a private place. The disciples find him and say, ***"Everyone is searching for you."*** But he insists that they move on. People everywhere need healing, of course. But he does not heal everyone, and he seems preoccupied, as if some kind of trouble is coming.

Throughout human history few things have changed as much as our understanding of disease and health. Ancient people were as concerned as we are with the prevention and cure of illness, but they had limited insights into the causes and the treatments of their ailments. Still, what is remarkable is the degree to which they transcended these limitations. In the fifth century before Christ, the Egyptian god of healing, Asklepios, became the namesake for sanctuaries and cults dedicated to the healing arts. These facilities, called *asklepions*, provided healing baths, healthy foods, and quiet rooms for sleep and meditation. There were also prayers, animal sacrifices, and votive offerings to the patron god, Asklepios. In the same period, Hippocrates, the most famous physician of the period, wrote medical treatises that would be used for centuries to come. So, some of these ancients were advanced beyond what we might suppose. They knew, for example, that the lancing, draining, and cleaning of infected wounds promoted healing. They knew that certain herbs had healing and disinfecting properties. They discovered natural cures for nausea, dysentery, and diarrhea. In the second and third centuries C.E., the Roman physician Galen was performing surgeries that included the removal of cataracts.

Think what Jesus could have done! Compared to Asklepios, Hippocrates, and Galen, Jesus was the master healer, the greatest healer of all times. He could have healed the world! Jesus could have ended human suffering on the earth! But in

the wilderness the devil had offered him the world. Apparently Jesus didn't come to rule the world, or heal all its diseases. This is precisely what was so frustrating to the people of first-century Palestine. Jesus simply would not do what the people knew he could do. Everywhere he went there was poverty and hunger. He could multiply loaves and fish, and the people needed a Bread Messiah. Everywhere Jesus went people were oppressed. When they were not being mistreated by their own leaders, they were being abused by Roman soldiers. Jesus had thrown the crooked peddlers out of the temple, and the people needed a Ruler Messiah. Diseases, deformities, and pain were everywhere. Jesus had healed the sick, restored eyes and ears, raised the dead, and the people needed a Healer Messiah. Jesus would not be who the people wanted him to be, needed him to be, and they finally gave up on him. ***“He came unto his own, and his own received him not.”***

Here is the truth about our situation. We have always wanted a Superstar Messiah, who provides for all our *felt* needs. For example, we need food, shelter, and security; we need strong leaders in a dangerous world; we need health care and the healing arts. Our Messiah needs to be capable, powerful, and competent. But the One who has come is a Suffering Messiah. Who could possibly need that? Jesus certainly suffered, but how does that help us?

Our truest and deepest need is for love. Created in the image of God, we are made with the need to love and to be loved. Without love we cannot be fully human. The Incarnation is the gift of God's own self in a human life. In Jesus we see as much of God as can be expressed in a human life. Our own humanity is affirmed in the Incarnation. It is good to be human. God's love for us is revealed in Jesus Christ, not only as creatures made in God's image, but as disobedient children who have marred that image. God in Christ suffers, because God loves us despite our sinfulness. In Christ we experience God's love as unconditional, as love in spite of everything. ***“To love is to suffer,”*** say the French. The Suffering Messiah is the revelation of God's love for you and for me.

When the church is true to our Lord, it thinks differently from the world. In the world, whatever is needed to achieve a desired end is justified. Coercion, repression, deception, and violence are often used to get things done in the world. But the church is held to a higher standard, where there is a necessary compatibility between means and ends. The church cannot use instruments of control to achieve the goal of freedom. The church cannot use self-centered means to achieve the goal of love. If that speaks to your soul, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.