

# ***Who Do You Say That I Am?***

Mark 8: 27-38

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We're getting deeper and deeper into the gospel according to Mark this month, and in Mark's story two themes are thickening as we arrive at our text today. First, trouble's looming. The Romans are clamping down on religious threats, and have just beheaded John the Baptist. And while the Roman muscle is starting to flex right outside the doors, religious authorities are starting to sneer and jab inside the doors around Jesus. The elders called the Pharisees are challenging Jesus and consider his ministry subversive. As the threats mount outside and inside, it's only a matter of time before these two powers get to Jesus.

Meanwhile, the disciples and followers of Jesus repeatedly lack faith. They witness healings and exorcisms, hear divine teachings, witness miracles of feeding thousands on only a few fishes and loaves of bread. And yet when they are on a boat in a stormy sea with Jesus they freak out. When they forget to bring enough bread on a journey they freak out. When they hear about threats they freak out.

Their repeated lack of faith finally begins to get to Jesus in chapter 8, and he pops off. "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? 18Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? 19When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you have left over? 21Then he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'" Do you get all this, the reason I am here? Do you get me?

And then immediately before our text today, Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida. But the way he heals this blind man seems very relevant to the gospel Mark is telling. Jesus touches this man once and he sees, but his vision is blurry, implying that even if Jesus has touched you, you might need more vision correction. Then Jesus touches him again, and the man sees everything clearly. To get this Jesus, to see everything clearly, says Mark the gospel-teller, you're going to have to let Jesus touch you again.

## **Mark 8: 27-38 (NRSV)**

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' 28And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' 29He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' 30And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Nothing says church Rally Day like our scripture today – Jesus died on a cross, so should you! I'm no former marketing executive, but... wait, actually I am a former marketing executive, and that stinks for today. Thanks for nothing, scripture calendar, at least it would seem...

In the beginning of our text today, Jesus is just returning from Gentile country to Jewish country, on the outskirts of Galilee, and on the way traveling he asks his disciples, who do people say that I am? They say prophets, someone in touch with what God is saying to us, a messenger. Then Jesus got straight to the point, But who do you say that I am? And Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to say anything.

After half a gospel full of misunderstanding, at least Peter finally gets that Jesus is the Messiah. The Messiah, of course, the legend of the coming “anointed one,” is the one whom the Jews have been hoping would come for hundreds of years who will unite the tribes of Israel and usher forth an age of global peace. Jewish prophets like Isaiah and Daniel foretold of this messiah, and it became the hope of a beleaguered people who feared their best days were behind them. And Peter understands that Jesus is the Messiah, that he is the deliverer of the nation, that he is the fulfillment of God’s promises through the prophets, that he is the gateway to a new age of peace and unity. And yet Jesus sternly ordered the disciples to be quiet, he shushed them.

Peter got it, but not quite. And as the rest of the text reveals, it has to do with the complexity of Jewish tradition about The Messiah, and how Jesus fits into it. In Jewish “messianic” tradition, there are basically two messiahs, the messiah son of David, and the messiah son of Joseph. Some prophets said there would be a great king, in the manner of David, who would restore Israel’s greatness with royal stature. And another prophetic word said there would be a “suffering servant,” in the manner of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, who would suffer the burdens of sin and brokenness and bring the people back to God. There was a dual consciousness about the coming messiah in Jewish tradition, the mighty king and the suffering servant, who each would restore and reconcile a fallen people.

So this passage we read today is about what kind of messiah Jesus is – is he a royal king restoring glory and honor to a nation, or is he a lowly servant reconciling broken people to God? Jesus goes on to teach the disciples that the Son of Man, a term used for the one who would be the messiah, must undergo great suffering, be rejected and killed, and after three days rise again. This may be a great messiah in the manner of David, this Jesus, but make no mistake this is also a lowly messiah in the manner of Joseph. Jesus is a king who will give his mortal life for the sake of God’s love on earth.

And Peter then personifies the problem with the messiah, the hope of all us Jews. Not only is this tradition about the messiah confusing and two-faced, but in its confusion it plays on the limits and brokenness of human hope and faith. When Jesus talks about rejection, dying, and rising, Peter rebukes him. It cannot be like that, Jesus. You are our savior and king, Lord Jesus, we cannot lose you. Our hope cannot go that far, unto death, those are the clutches from which nothing returns.

And then Jesus’ inquisition and exposition has reached its ultimate point, it seems to have unearthed that frail broken place inside even the Christ followers, which holds them back from understanding the way God loves and the way God works. His response comes out with energy, get behind me satan, you are setting your mind on human things, not divine things. Do you not yet understand? Do you get all this, the reason I am here? Do you get me?

Then Jesus calls the crowd up with the disciples as if to say, “everybody, listen up.” ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. The text demands of Christian followers a decision, will we follow this man to the place that he is going? Are we willing to let go of ourselves to embrace a new and different life?

Theologian Karl Barth claims that grace is the enemy of everything, and it comes to proclaim a “perpetual revolution.” The gospel of Jesus Christ walks the earth to threaten everything, the way we see the world, and the way we see God, and the way we see ourselves. God’s love for us calls us to be the minister we were created to be, to stand for justice and not stasis, and to walk with the neighbor we often ignore.

You can stumble on this revolution everywhere. This week I was down in Rogers Park this week leading a bible study for women and their children in a shelter. These are some of the people, by the way, who have invited us to lunch on 9/27 after worship. I was teaching an old standby passage, the beatitudes, a gospel passage full of hope for a new age, a heaven on earth. It seemed like a message they needed to hear in such a situation.

The bible study was going along swimmingly, and to engage the women and their children in the lesson, I engaged them in a back and forth with questions. One of the lines goes, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. I probed this image Jesus uses, hunger and thirst, and asked them for some specifics. What happens when you are hungry or thirsty for something? I clarified, what happens if you are hungry and thirsty, and there's a bag of chips and a coke in front of you? What's going to get in your way of eating and drinking? I was, I thought, elucidating Jesus' teaching. Then Nancy spoke words that grabbed me by the collar, saying "well, sometimes money gets in the way of eating and drinking. Ain't got no money, ain't gonna get no satisfaction, no matter how hungry or thirsty you are."

We all had a good laugh over that one, I was laughing because I had just learned something deep and profound about my new friends, and about their keen sense of the kind of justice and righteousness that Jesus was talking about. The very gospel hope Jesus was proclaiming, seeking righteousness, has tremendous obstacles like systems and economics and money stashes and throats run dry. You better take up your cross and follow me, says Jesus, this is a message that's hopeful, but it's costly.

I could hear the gospel whispers of Jesus around me all week, do you get me? Do you get me? To follow me into the world reigned by God, you have to first let yourself be ruled by God, a God whose justice is revolutionary, a God whose righteousness is so costly it requires you to give up your sense about the world, and about your life.

The letting go of yourself has to do with getting outside yourself. The denying yourself, the giving yourself up to live differently, happens. But it starts with getting outside of the status quo, the boundaries of your existence, and trying on new and strange things. That's what Jesus is doing in his ministry, in Galilee. He's out there, giving himself up, living for others, living for the sake not of himself but for the gospel.

And then another visit this week came from a homeless veteran, who stopped by the church on his walk along the Edens. He survived combat, but had to lose a fourth of his brain to stick around. He was mad about what happened, thought the world had it out for him, but then he got a job, the only job he could find, at a church homeless shelter washing dishes. There he saw people living for others, people who had hard knocks like he did, but they didn't seem to be weighed down by their scars. I had to let go of what I thought, and embrace this strange love, he said, that I eventually learned had a source, the bible. Now he was out for a walk looking for places that need his love the most. He's starting with Presbyterians. This man's costly pursuit of loving and serving knows a depth that I think many of us are probably still seeking.

Put yourself on the line for the sake of the gospel, says Jesus, for it is there that the god-powered life can be found. Jesus asks, do you get me?