

Mark 8:27-30
"Who do you say Jesus is?"

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October 4, 2020

For the last 5 months, one of the most meaningful experiences in church and community that I've had has turned out to be one of the most meaningful experiences in church and community that I've ever had. It involves getting on Zoom three days a week to read and reflect on scripture with a small group of folks. The whole thing started out as an idea for how to keep us connected during this time of COVID. For me, it's turned into an important spiritual discipline. 3 times a week, no matter what else I'm doing, no matter how important I may think it is, I stop and get on Zoom for 15 – 20 minutes to read God's word and listen for what is being said. For those of you who have been on these calls, you know that sometimes the airwaves get filled up a bit too much with the sound of my voice, but the idea is always to read and listen to God's word together. Because this is how God's word is supposed to be read and listened to: together. In the earliest Christian communities, people gathered in homes to read scripture *together*, and to consider what it was calling them to be and do *together*. When you read scripture this way, you deny any one person the ability to form a monopoly on God's word. There is the way you read and hear it, and there is the way I read and hear it, and the meaning is found in our shared commitment to read it and hear it *together*. This is why, on Sunday mornings, when we get to that part in the service where we say, "This is the word of the Lord," you may have noticed we say this after the scripture is read, and not after the sermon has been preached. Because the word of God is in the reading and hearing of the text together, and not necessarily in one what person alone has to say about what they've heard. The job of the preacher then is not to enlighten, but to illuminate. It is to give us permission to consider, to explore, to be curious.

I would guess that most of us have grown tired of Zoom. It's not a great medium for making and sharing community. But I will give it this: when I get on Zoom three times a week to read scripture with you, I never know who's going to get on. I never know who is going to add their perspective to the reading. The lesson here is that if you really want to hear what God's word has to say, you can't say that you already know what it has to say, because if we're truly listening for God's word together, it means we're listening for voices

and perspectives and truths other than just our own. And this means we should come to God's word expecting to be surprised.

This is certainly some of what I feel when I hear this story about Jesus and his disciples. Jesus has brought them all together in one place to listen for God's word. In this case, God's word is not the scriptures, but Jesus himself. This is the whole point of the gospels, to make us see that the word of God has leapt off the page and appeared in the world as flesh and blood in the person of Jesus. Only in Mark's gospel, this Word is shrouded in mystery. If you've ever read the Bible and left scratching your head, well Mark's gospel is for you. Mark begins his gospel in chapter 1 with a clear heading: "The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark is leaving no room for doubt. He's laying it all out there. This is a story about Jesus, the Son of God. And sure enough, read along in Mark's gospel and it seems like a story about someone who is a Son of God, and may even be God. Page after page Jesus does things no ordinary human being could do. He walks on water, he casts demons out of crazy people, he astounds the teachers with his teaching, he uses his saliva to create some sort of magical ointment that he then spreads on the eyes of a blind man to make him see, he feeds thousands of people with just a couple loaves of bread and some fish, and he does this not once but twice! It would seem as if Jesus is the Son of God, and that this is all good news.

But then we get to the story we have read and heard today, where Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The question alone inserts a new possibility into the story. Maybe who Jesus is, is not so obvious after all. The disciples answer, "Some say you are John the Baptist, and others Elijah." Now this would be amazing enough, because both John the Baptist and Elijah are dead. If Jesus is one of them, that makes Jesus either the walking dead or the resurrected dead.

Let's pretend for a moment that this is the question Jesus is asking us this morning: who do people say that I am? I immediately think of all the people I know who call themselves Christian. I mean, to be a Christian is to be like Jesus, so I think of Mother Teresa and what she might say in answer to this question. She was known to carry lepers in off the streets

of Calcutta and bathe them with her own two hands in her convent, in a tub that had been dug out of the earth, and above the tub hung a sign that read: "The Body of Christ." Mother Teresa's point is, I'm not so much Jesus, this leper is.

I think of the folks at Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas who have a reputation for picketing the funerals of veterans, and carrying signs that say, "God hates the gays." Ask them why they do it, and they'll tell you, "We're Christians. We do what Jesus would do."

I think of an Arapaho Indian woman I read about once who is said to have adopted 15 children. And she didn't adopt bright-eyed babies. No, she adopted teenagers. Smart-mouthed, tough skinned teenagers whose parents never gave a care about them. She said, "I'll show them how it's supposed to go." Why do you do it, she was asked. She quoted 1 John 4: "See what love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God." Can't say they're not my kids. We're all children of God.

I think of think of Joe Biden and Donald Trump. They have both said they are Christians, and they should both know something about who Jesus is.

"Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples. It's not a hard question to answer. All I have to do is look around and listen to what's being said. Well, some say you're the woman who bathes the lepers, others say you're the protester at the funeral, still others say you're a bit of a politician.

But then Jesus turns the question, as he always seems to do. "Yes, but who do you say that I am?" Now this is a different kettle of fish, isn't it? To answer this question, we can't look outward to what everyone else thinks, we're going to have to look inward to what we think. Out of all the disciples, Peter is the only one to give an answer, but then again, Peter has a reputation for being a bit impulsive. "You are the Messiah," the Christ, the One who has come to save us in every way possible.

Did Peter get it right? If this were Final Jeopardy, has Peter won the grand prize? In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus tells Peter, "Yes, you've got it right." But here in Mark's gospel, all Jesus does is to sternly order the disciples not to tell anyone about him.

It's one of the great mysteries in scripture for me, why Jesus wouldn't want anyone to know who he is. Of all the things we could say about what it means to be a Christian, isn't telling the world about Jesus high on the list?

"Who do you say that I am?"

In his book, *"The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the ways Jesus is the way,"* Eugene Peterson writes this:

"The American way has become the way of acquisition, an economy that is dependent on wanting more, requiring more. And so, it hasn't taken long for some of our Christian brothers and sisters to develop consumer congregations. If we have a nation of consumers, obviously the quickest and most effective way to get [people] into our churches is to identify what they want to offer it to them, satisfy their fantasies, promise them the moon, recast the gospel as entertainment, excitement, adventure, problem-solving, whatever."¹

But try as we may, sooner or later we who call ourselves Christians will have to contend with this question, "Who do you say that I am?" and with a Jesus who measures abundance in terms of sacrifice, who is not afraid to lose his life at the hands of the powerful if it means standing up for the powerless, who sees in bread his own broken body, who is intent on carrying a cross, and who wants us to do the same.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus wants to know. I'll leave you with this question.

¹ P. 6