

“Who Are You? Who Am I?” • Mark 8:27 – 30
Sheth LaRue • September 16, 2018
Parkway Presbyterian Church

This morning’s text from Mark is a pivotal point in the book, it’s physically the half-way point in the story and the reader is reaching the arc of the story in our passage.

The book of Mark is literally a quick gospel: when reading the text, one can see that Jesus is always on the move from one city or town to the next, and the book is chock full of the Greek word *eutheos*, which is used at least 40 times, a word meaning ‘immediately’ or ‘at once’. Jesus goes immediately...at once someone is healed...the story seems to be either rushed, or Jesus is heading somewhere with great intention.

In this morning’s text we see Jesus and company again on the move, making their way from Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi, and Mark catches them en te hodo – on the way – he brings us back into the story as they were walking.

Imagine being there, walking with Jesus along that dusty road. A group of you trudging along in the sun as you carry on small talk about things going on back home, about your family, or about the weather. Then, apropos of nothing, Jesus says to the group: “Hey, quick question: who do people say I am?”

You’re excited, because you know the answer to this question! You’ve been paying attention! Jesus has tossed this softball-sized question at you – and you know the answer! Who do people say you are, Jesus? “They say you’re a prophet!” Others around you answer with, “John the Baptist!” or “Elijah!”

Jesus nods his head in understanding, stops and turns, and then asks, “But, who do you say I am?” Up until this point you’ve witnessed Jesus perform some miracles, you’ve heard him give some good speeches, and you’ve seen him counsel people who needed help. But what kind of label do you put on someone who can do all those things? How well do you know Jesus? Who do you say he is?

Certainly Jesus has been moving quickly to-and-fro, from town to town, healing and feeding and teaching, but in no way does he not know who people say he is. Jesus is not seeking information that he doesn’t already know. He’s not reflecting on some sort of biographical realism in which Jesus has been secluded but his disciples are more in touch with the word on the street.

Jesus has supernatural knowledge and does not need to be informed. The first question posed, “Who do the people say I am” is a set up for his second question, “Who do you say I am?”

Peter, the rock, was the one who answered this question, stating, “You are the Messiah.” This answer from Peter is a big deal – the Messiah was promised long ago and had been so often prophesied in the books of Moses and the prophets; the Messiah was the one whom the Jews had so much and so long expected. For Peter and most Jews, the messiah referred to a militaristic, political figure who would overthrow Rome’s power and establish a new kingdom of God. Peter’s confession exceeds the sentiments of the people – Jesus isn’t a prophet, he’s the one the prophets spoke about!

And after this short exchange, Jesus tells his disciples to remain quiet. Was Peter’s answer wrong? Was Peter’s idea incorrect, the idea that Jesus would be the liberator who would free the people of Israel from tyranny? Jesus doesn’t say whether or not Peter’s reply is right or wrong, but instead he begins to speak of the suffering, rejection, and death that the Son of Man will soon face. Jesus doesn’t say that ‘Messiah’ is an incorrect title, but instead he redefines the word from a title of triumphant power to a name associated with rejection.

Jesus’ prediction of things to come is not what his disciples had expected, and most certainly not what they had wanted to hear. The words spoken are so shocking, Peter pulls Jesus aside – physically removes him – to rebuke him; Jesus wasn’t just saying something a little off, Jesus’ words, in Peter’s opinion, were completely incorrect. The words Jesus was speaking weren’t what Peter – and the rest of the disciples – wanted to hear.

Jesus follows these predictions of rejection, pain, and death with a call to discipleship, this time not merely to his twelve, but he lays out for all to hear the way to the cross and what one must truly do to follow him. Jesus not only redefined his role, but he redefined the role of his followers. They could no longer think they would be reigning with Jesus the Messiah on earth; they were now explicitly told what they would face if they continued to follow *en te hodo* ‘on the way’. The story in Mark has moved from “Who is Jesus?” through “What does being Christ mean?” and into “What does being a disciple mean?”

Disciple is a tough word to deal with, especially when thinking about Peter’s predicament. He had expectations of what his role would be in the kingdom – maybe slightly below Jesus’ reign, but still someone with power in this newly formed Israelite powerhouse.

Just like Peter, it's difficult for us, as well, because we don't expect this journey to be difficult. How many of us were told that following after Jesus would be the best decision we've ever made? I was raised non-denominational/Baptist, and I can clearly recall when I was "saved". Being eleven years old, I didn't understand all of the theological concepts that were presented to me as I spoke with my pastor - original sin, my personal sin, the rift between God and me, and Jesus' work on the cross which bridged that gap. I didn't 'get' it, but that day I decided to follow Jesus.

I was told that my life would be better because of this choice, and as an eleven year old, I took that to mean that I wouldn't suffer, I wouldn't struggle, my wallet would be overflowing, and I would be loved and cared for at every turn. However, the promise of sunshine and lollipops has been reduced to partly-cloudy days and a tootsie-roll now and then.

I believe our mistake is in assuming Jesus said things that he didn't really say. Jesus didn't promise Peter, the other disciples, the crowd that was listening, nor us that following him would be easy. Quite the contrary in the book of Mark – Jesus says that those who wish to be his disciples must deny self, take up one's cross, and follow Jesus.

We often assume that denying one's self is a sort of abstaining work – avoiding all things good and tasty and enjoyable. But simply doing without or enduring suffering does not make a follower of Christ. Denying one's self is to no longer make oneself the top priority and the center of one's own universe. This call to discipleship means self-denial, not self-fulfillment. It means self-sacrificing love, not self-actualizing power. But this is not self-hatred, either – a disciple must also take care and love who they are – but must realize that the other is just as important as they are.

The crosses we have to bear are part of being a disciple – but they're not the inconveniences or sufferings that are part of life. The crosses we bear are voluntary, they're *taken up*, and we share in the suffering involved in discipleship and Christian mission. We should attach this cross bearing with the self-denial – we must put aside our own thoughts and wishes and carry what is placed in front of us.

This denial of self, this taking up crosses, this following Jesus is the costly way in an imitation of the Christ that brushed aside fame, popularity, and a seat of power for a life of sacrifice, of helping others, of standing against oppression, of speaking truth.

This past May I was able to visit with my grandmother one last time before she moved from this earth, and I will vividly remember that encounter forever, not because it was my last one with her, and not because anything profound was said, but because my suspicions were proven correct – she was indeed a true disciple of Christ.

That afternoon in May, I sat in the nursing home watching my grandmother's frail hands slightly shake, uncontrolled, as they waivered over the open Bible in front of her. She looked at me, then back to the text, and then back at me. I could see the frustration in her eyes: she was frustrated because she wanted to talk to me and ask me questions about the book, but she was also frustrated by the book itself. She pushed her weakened voice until a tiny sentence came out, ragged and quiet, "How do I read this?"

In her 95 years my grandma encountered the Bible many times – she had been to church for nearly all those years, had a close relationship with God, and fostered the love of her Creator in her children and grandchildren. Over the last few years of her life she occasionally admitted to me that she had struggled in reading and understanding the Bible and all it entailed. Her beliefs never waivered much, but she wrestled with comprehending the words she read and her call to discipleship.

In that moment as we sat together in the nursing home, I desperately wanted to say something profound and inspirational to her. I wanted to say something that would console her in her final weeks on this earth; I thought for a second and blurted out, "Keep doing what you're doing. Read, ask questions, pray, re-read, pray, ask questions. And repeat that again and again." I smiled and held her hand, but I knew my answer wasn't entirely profound, and definitely not inspirational. Being able to read her face, I knew that my words frustrated her even more.

It was hard to guide my grandmother at that moment in how to read the Bible because she knew the Bible. She lived out her discipleship when she fed the hungry and gave to the needy, raised a good family, encouraged her friends, talked with others about God, brought my grandpa utter joy and love for over fifty years, and she built a strong household.

My grandma sought after God and found what she was looking for in spite of her doubts, fears, and frustrations. She may have thought she wasn't doing this Christianity thing right, but she was doing it exactly the way it should be done. She plowed forward and fought to find God so she could hear that still, small voice in the deserts of her life. She professed her love of God with her voice, with her smile, with her love for others. She understood the Bible more than she

thought she did, and taught many others around her how to understand it as well. She was a true disciple. She denied her self, took up her cross, and followed hard after Jesus.

Friends, this call to be disciples is a tough call. Just like Jesus' call, ours is not glamorous, nor does it pay much, and it's not what we'd expect it to be. Who are you? Who am I? The answers to these questions are wrapped up in our discovery of who Jesus was. Not all who have understood him are giants or martyrs in Christendom. The couple who open their home to foster children, the man who is faithfully devoted to his mentally ill wife, the woman who provides shelter for battered women, the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience's sake leads to prison – these are among countless thousands...millions...who have interpreted Jesus' call to discipleship by their lives.

By understanding who Jesus is, we can understand who we are. We are disciples: learners who follow Jesus. What we must learn above all is to follow Jesus in his obedience to the will of God, though it means suffering and death to our egos.

I'll conclude with these words from Reverend Jill Duffield: "In life and in death, we belong to God. We are not the masters of our own fate or makers of our own stories...nor are we pawns in some cosmic chess game. We are children of God, disciples of Jesus, members of the Body of Christ. Adopted. Engrafted. Members of the holy household. That's who we are. That's who we are because Jesus is the Messiah. Nothing can separate us from the love of God anymore. Once we've been found, what do we possibly have to lose?"¹

¹ Jill Duffield, "17th Sunday After Pentecost – September 16, 2018" *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 14, 2018. <https://pres-outlook.org/2018/09/17th-sunday-after-pentecost-september-16-2018/>