

September 15, 2024

A Heavy Heart

Mark 8:27-38

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?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And 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. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But 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 wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those 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."

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

"Who do people say I am?" What a curious question coming from the lips of Jesus. Given that Googling his name was not an option, he asks his disciples to tell him what people are saying about him. John the Baptist is one reply. John was a respected prophet, killed by Herod after criticizing him for marrying his brother's wife. Elijah is another answer. He was a fiery prophet like John the Baptist. They both drew large crowds. Even though both are dead, Jesus could be one of them back to life. "One of the prophets," is the third response to Jesus' inquiry.

If Jesus asked us this question, I imagine our list would be much longer. How might we reply to Jesus' question – Who do people say I am?

- Son of God
- Lord
- Savior
- Great moral teacher
- The invisible God made visible
- Love incarnate
- Friend
- Healer
- Teacher
- Prophet
- Prince of Peace
- Christ, which is Greek for Messiah
- Lamb of God
- Son of Man
- Shepherd
- Light of the World
- Bread of Life
- King of the Jews
- The Word
- The Way the Truth and the Life

I'm sure we could add more. Many of these are titles and words that are part of our common liturgy. We know them, but we might waffle a bit if asked to expound upon them. We know in part, but not in full.

If Jesus were to ask us today, "Who do people say I am?" We might be tempted to ask for some clarification. We might look at Jesus and say, "Well that depends...are you asking about the historical Jesus or how Jesus is now understood by his followers?"

If you were to do a random street survey, you would likely get an interesting list of answers...everything from "a cool dude" to "the son of God who died to take away my sins so I can go to heaven."

If you were to walk into some Christian churches, you might hear apocalyptic tales where Jesus is angry and coming again to destroy all those who have rejected him with violence so graphic it makes Hollywood shudder. Or you might hear about a non-violent

Jesus who speaks truth to power and suffers the consequences. In some churches Jesus is adored, in others he is followed. In some churches Jesus is synonymous with God, in others he is fully human.

In the old television show “To Tell the Truth,” three contestants face a panel of celebrity judges. Only one of the three is telling the truth about their occupation. The other two are just making stuff up. After a round or two of questions, the panelists submit their vote for who is telling the truth. Then the host says, “Would the real so and so stand up?”

It seems like everybody has an opinion about who Jesus is. Wouldn't it be nice if the real Jesus just stood up? Why, after all these years, do we still not know? Jesus is regarded as one of the most influential people in history, and yet, he is wildly misunderstood and worse yet, portrayals of him have been used to promote everything he stood against.

Our scripture reading for today invites us into this confusion.

Then Jesus looks at us and asks, “Who do **you** say I am?”

As followers of Jesus, it seems like we should be able to answer that question – and our answer matters. Our answer to that question impacts what it means for us to follow Jesus.

Of the disciples surrounding Jesus **on the way** to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, Peter is the one who answers Jesus' question. He answers confidently, “You are the Messiah.” And in case you didn't know the word “Christ” is the Greek word for “Messiah” which is Hebrew. “You are the Messiah,” says Peter. “You are the Christ.”

Peter appears to get it, but does he really get it? Let's see...

Jesus continues teaching his disciples on the way and he tells them, “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.”

At this point the wheels in Peter's head start to spin. Wait a minute! That's not what is supposed to happen to the Messiah! The Messiah is going to restore Israel! The Messiah is going to liberate us from this Roman oppression! The Messiah is going to save us! Whatever Peter thought a Messiah was supposed to do and be in no way

resembled what Jesus was saying. “No way!” was Peter’s response. And he pulls Jesus to the side to say so.

Then Jesus turns back to the disciples and says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Clearly, Peter doesn’t get it...yet...

I love how Brian McClaren writes about this moment. He writes:

Like most of his countrymen, Peter knows with unquestioned certainty that God will send a Messiah to lead an armed uprising to defeat and expel the occupying Roman regime and all who collaborate with it. But no, Jesus says. That way of thinking is human, Satanic, the opposite of God’s plan. Since the beginning Jesus has taught that the nonviolent will inherit the Earth. Violence cannot defeat violence. Hate cannot defeat hate. Fear cannot defeat fear. Domination cannot defeat domination. God’s way is different. God must achieve victory through defeat, glory through shame, strength through weakness, leadership through servanthood, and life through death. < McClaren concludes> The finely constructed mental architecture in which Peter has lived his whole adult life is threatened by this paradoxical message. It’s not the kind of change of perspective that happens easily.¹

It will be a while before Peter and the others fully understand what Jesus says next as he calls the crowd together with his disciples and tells them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Deny yourselves...take up your cross...follow me.

It challenges so much of the conventional wisdom of our own time and place; conventional wisdom that tells us to serve our own interests above all else. Conventional wisdom that says that violence is power, that justice is retribution, that vulnerability is weakness, that grace condones evil, that the world is ours to exploit, that some people don’t count, that says kill or be killed, that says wealth is security.

Jesus challenges this kind of conventional thinking.

Deny yourselves...take up your cross...follow me.

This is Jesus’ invitation to discipleship.

¹ Brian McClaren, “We Make the Road by Walking,” pp. 118-119

It's not an invitation to go to heaven when you die. He's inviting us to an earthly journey with a heavenly cause. It's an invitation to follow him as he begins his journey to Jerusalem. Follow him to the Mount of Transfiguration. Follow him as he rides into the city on a donkey. Follow him as he challenges systems of oppression and exclusion. Follow him as he invites people to imagine a new reality called the kingdom of God. Follow him as he is threatened and ultimately killed for leading a revolution of love. Follow him to the sealed tomb, where all hope seems lost. Follow him from the empty tomb to Galilee where he ministers to those on the margins. Follow him.

Deny yourselves...take up your cross...and follow Jesus.

The disciples, just like us, are on the way. We are on the way to figuring it out. We are on the way to love and life. We are on the way to Christlikeness. We are on the way to comprehending what it means to deny ourselves, and to take up our cross, and to follow Jesus. We are on the way to understanding what it means to call Jesus our Lord, and our Savior.

Did you know the earliest followers of Jesus were called, "People of the way." Not "people who have it all figured out."

Our passage for today allows us to eavesdrop on the disciples trying to wrap their brains around something that is challenging to hear. The cross wasn't some metaphorical form of hardship – it was the cross of crucifixion and death. The cross was a threat to shut up anyone who challenges the status quo.

Deny yourselves...take up your cross...and follow Jesus.

If you are still trying to wrap your brain around that – its okay – it is something we will figure out, on the way...with Jesus...with each other.

May we be people of the way.

And the way is Jesus.

Who do you say he is?