

Mark 8:27-38

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?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.'

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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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.'

“Turning Point”

A few months ago I read an editorial by a man who was upset by a biography of him available online at Wikipedia. Wikipedia is a free-content online encyclopedia that uses Wiki software to make online collaboration possible for those of us that aren't techies. Anyone can be an editor on Wikipedia. The site grows through the collaboration of whoever wants to log on and participate. Apparently there were factual mistakes on this man's biography. He felt the public was being misinformed about him, so he got online and edited his biography. Shortly afterwards he looked it up and found it had been edited back again. After inquiries, he was told he couldn't put a block on the factual info and restrict it from future editing. He could continue to edit, so could others. His experience challenged his belief that free collaboration is inherently good and that it reveals the truth.

You could tell from the editorial that the author felt vulnerable. He didn't choose to have his bio open for public editing. He simply found his life and work listed on Wikipedia, his biography wide open for interpretation, discussion and misrepresentation.

In our Gospel text Jesus risks what the man in the editorial sought to restrict. Jesus invites reflection on his purpose and life by asking his disciples these questions, "Who do the people say that I am" and then "But who do you say that I am?" Is he crazy? Which one of us wants to hold a communal forum to tell us who we are? He invites not only his friends to comment, but asks to hear what "the people" say too! It's like being famous today and asking the tabloids to say who they think you are. Who do the people, and you, say that I am?

Thus far in Mark's Gospel, there is no clear answer to his question, even for the disciples. The demons call him "Son of God", the scribes see him as possessed, his family thinks he's lost his mind, and the general public believes him to be a prophet or John the Baptist or Elijah. So when Peter gets the million-dollar question right, "You are the Messiah, the Anointed One," why does Jesus sternly order them not to tell anyone? We know as readers the answer is right. Shouldn't this be a moment of rejoicing or a bonding scene between the disciples and their Messiah? A group hug seems in order, but

Jesus doesn't even give a sigh of relief when someone finally says who he is! Instead they are to remain silent—to hold this secret within.

Why this call for secrecy? I think it has to do with the same reason the man in the editorial was uncomfortable with his continually edited biography on Wikipedia—people kept getting the facts wrong. What could be worse as Jesus heads toward his cross, than a bunch of disciples who barely have a clue of who he is shooting their mouths off when they don't grasp Jesus' mission and purpose? They have yet to accept what type of Messiah he was; they have yet to learn to follow his way!

Jesus' "way" is something other than what a Jew of the day expected. Based on Jewish scriptural tradition the Messiah was to come in power and royal triumph to restore Israel. All this talk of rejection, suffering and death and resurrection just didn't jive. Peter tried to rebuke Jesus for his words. You can't suffer—this is ludicrous. I'll re-write that part of your bio for you, Jesus, and make it fit the norms of what we've been taught. Peter's words fell on deaf ears. "Get behind me Peter (a.k.a.-doer of Satan's work for the moment)! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." We learn with Peter the confession, "You are the Messiah" in itself does not mean the confessor is conformed to God's will. There is so much more to being in relationship with God than knowing words of confession. There's a way to live. The disciples must come to understand what proclaiming Jesus as Christ means through Jesus' teachings. They still have yet to see his death and resurrection and to accept what they witness as a way of living their lives. One of my seminary professors has written, "How the confession of Jesus as Messiah becomes life-giving and productive is one of the major questions that runs" through Mark's Gospel.¹

We are desensitized to the scandal of Jesus' words about suffering and cross bearing, but the disciples standing with him that day knew they were hearing something new. They were truly puzzled. How can a suffering Messiah, a suffering God incarnate, save and manifest God's glory and power?

We're at a turning point in Jesus' life in Mark's Gospel. As of today's text, Jesus and the disciples are "on the way" pointed toward Jerusalem as they travel. It makes a difference, to the disciple and reader, what type of messiah Jesus was and is. All the disciples glimpse in the moment is a suffering, eventually dead Messiah. No one understands the good of "and after three days I'll rise again". Will they come to see the hope and joy of the gospel? Will the disciples experience the journey? Mark's gospel is proof that they did stick around and continue to share the story.

Now "But who do you say that I am?" becomes a question for us to answer. How do we know if what we profess and the way we live our lives is any less in conflict with God's will--than Peter attempting to rebuke Jesus?

For starters we can understand our relationship to our Messiah, "Disciples are not to guide, protect, or possess Jesus; they are to follow him." ...Peter and the rest of the Twelve will follow this boundary-breaking Messiah on 'the way' and embrace taking up their own cross as they set themselves on the same trajectory of Jesus...this does not mean adopting a posture of a doormat or giving up certain pleasures or desires." It means...accepting God's claim upon our lives.² Sure, we follow by confession of faith, but more importantly we answer the question of who we believe Jesus is, by living his teachings. We'll only know what he said and how he lived if we read it.

Remember Jesus invites us to delve into his autobiography and interpret it ourselves as the Spirit inspires us. Unfortunately we aren't nearly as interested in reading about the "Way of the cross" as we are in reading or hearing about the latest in pop culture. When it comes to the message of our Lord and Savior we are sorely tempted to base our knowledge on Sunday worship and culture around us. Beware; both can shape us for better or worse! Maybe it's easier to write our own biography of Jesus, whether it is based on the scriptures or not, than turn to challenging words, but we'll miss one heck of a journey of grace if we do so.

For example, I could tell you this morning that to bear your cross means suffering, lots of suffering, suffering like Jesus did or we're not faithful! Many have before. But another interpretation might say this, "To be a "Christian" means to be involved with Jesus' cross. But what does that mean? ... For most of us...martyrdom is a slim prospect. ...Taking up your cross"³ should be seen less as a project than as the character of discipleship. We follow because we trust that God will complete what God has begun at our baptism." Taking up our cross is the character of discipleship—trust that God has done what is needed and persists in grace to pick us up when we fall on our faces as we follow God's way.

The story of our Messiah lives on only when it lives in you and me. To profess Jesus as Christ is to give up the right to define what "Christ" hypothetically means—because Jesus defines Messiah for us through his words and deeds. God's Spirit now abides in us so we can continue to follow our Savior's way.

Peter's story gives me hope. Peter barely knew what he was saying when he made his first confession. He betrayed Jesus and fled only weeks or months later. Yet grace persisted, grace was raised, and Peter came to discern God's ways versus human ways as the Holy Spirit guided him. He learned to take up his cross and followed the Messiah whom he proclaimed as: crucified and risen to live and reign over all. Amen.

¹ The Way of the Cross: Markan Texts for Late Pentecost, Donald H. Juel, Texts in Context, Word & World, Luther Northwestern Theological School, 1994.

² Brian K. Blount and Gray W. Charles, Preaching Mark in Two Voices (WKJP: Louisville, KY, 2002) 148.

³ *ibid*, Donald H. Juel.