

“Who Do You Say I Am?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 23, 2020

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 27

Mark 8:27-35

By the time this story happens, Jesus has made quite a name for himself. He has been travelling the countryside doing healings, exorcisms and other miracles. He has been saying a lot of things: sometimes provocative, sometimes funny, often insightful; and the crowds that follow along hang on everything he says and does. And, of course, he has gathered a closer group of followers, the disciples.

The word “disciple” simply means “student.” But Jesus’ students are not doing too well in class. They have been following him all over, they’ve seen everything he’s done and heard everything he’s said, but they can’t seem to master the class. This scene comes about half-way through the Gospel of Mark, so I guess you could say this is the mid-term exam. Jesus wants to know how much they’ve understood so far. *Who do the people say I am?* he wonders. A variety of answers follow. Then, he asks them, *but who do you say that I am?* And somehow, something clicks for Peter, and he actually comes up with the right answer. *You are the Messiah*, he says, and he passes the test.¹

And yet, the answer Peter gives is not actually very logical. The Hebrew title “Messiah” or “Christ” in Greek was associated in Jewish tradition with an anointed king, a royal ruler from the line of David expected to come and free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, to purify the people and restore Israel’s independence and glory.

So, as soon as Jesus begins to speak of what is to come for him as Messiah – rejection, suffering and death – Peter is quick to try and set him straight. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. We can imagine him saying, “No, Jesus, this is not the way things are meant to go. The Messiah is supposed to conquer the Romans, not get killed by them.”

Jesus’ response to Peter is pretty harsh. *Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.* This is one of those moments in Scripture that highlights the distance between us and God. Though Jesus is God with us, we cannot tame him or make him fit our own image. We would like a savior who is a winner, and one who makes us winners, but Jesus insists on

¹ J.C. Austin, “Following Jesus Is for Losers” from *Day1.org*

identifying with the lowliest of losers. He will allow himself to be judged and condemned as a blasphemer; to be mocked, tortured and executed as a criminal.²

Jesus doesn't call Peter Satan lightly; if you remember, Jesus began his ministry in the wilderness with Satan beside him, tempting him to see what kind of Messiah he really would be. It seems that here Jesus, too, has to take a mid-term exam, facing temptation again. And, here, too, he passes the test. He then calls the crowd and the disciples together and gives them the answer to the question of what kind of Messiah he really will be; what kind of Christ they have chosen to follow: *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 the sake of the gospel, will save it.*

It is important to remember what Jesus means by taking up the cross. He is not talking about the suffering that is simply part of life in a broken world – everything from serious illness to natural disasters to annoying neighbors. Neither is he telling us to seek out suffering or martyrdom. Jesus himself did not seek it, but he foresaw that it would be the inevitable outcome of his mission. Suffering is not good for its own sake; that is not why Jesus died on the cross.

Lots of times, when people say something or someone is “my cross to bear,” they mean suffering that is imposed on them, but which must nevertheless be accepted and endured without complaint. That is not what Jesus is saying. Suffering that is imposed on us against our will is not redemptive. Suffering on the cross was not imposed on Jesus; he took it up willingly and intentionally, to redeem all of us. To take up our cross and follow Jesus means we follow him in refusing to think only about ourselves but willingly suffer for the redemption of others, even if it means risking the loss of our lives.

For us, the cross represents not only death and suffering, but what can happen when we are not in relationship with others and think only of ourselves. Jesus' charge to take up your cross is not a demand to deny your true self. It is an invitation to remember the ways that we cannot exist without others, without intimacy, attention, and belonging; that we cannot be ourselves on our own. And when we are, it is a self-absorbed existence, narcissism in its truest form, where those around you are only pawns to placate your self-perceived importance.³

The third of the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations – following Lifelong Discipleship Formation and Intentional Authentic Evangelism – is Outward Incarnational Focus. As Jesus is teaching his followers in this passage, we are not

² Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Karoline Lewis, “A Different Kind of Denial”

meant to live only for ourselves, but that our eyes should focus on welfare of others. For them, it is sometimes necessary to lose our lives and willingly suffer for the sake of the gospel. Taking up our cross means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means being willing to lose our lives by using our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others might experience the love of God made known in Jesus Christ; a suffering that leads to redemption.

In the biography of Georgia Congressman John Lewis, a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the Civil Rights movement – who was injured during the march on Selma – he talks about what redemptive suffering is really like. “If someone is being attacked and beaten,” he said, “it is your responsibility to intervene to protect them.” But intervening does not mean returning violence with violence to drive the attacker away; intervening means stepping in and shielding your fellow marcher with your own body; “accepting the blows yourself in order to save them, even at risk to your own life.”⁴

This is a difficult possibility for us to accept, mostly because we don't want even to imagine it. But Lewis and the other civil rights marchers were committed to really taking up their cross and following Jesus through the practice of non-violence, going further than most of us would want to go. *Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it.* I guess the question is: what are we willing to lose?

A church that is focused only on saving its own life will lose it. A church that spends all of its energy and resources saving its building rather than empowering its mission is losing its life; instead, a living church makes its property a resource for mission, not an object of it. In the same way, a church seeking new members to save its budget is losing its life; instead, a living church welcomes new people in order to help nurture them as disciples.

Having an Outward Incarnational Focus means that we resist the temptation to deny who Jesus is and is about. The people of God in Christ's church are sent out into the world because God's redemptive love cannot be inwardly contained. We live in a world where people are hurting: suffering in circumstances either within or beyond their control. God calls us to see that we are connected with one another. Our followership is also a fellowship; a place where we help one another, support one another and even – when necessary – shield one another. But, together, we also turn our focus to others beyond our comfortable circles: practicing genuine hospitality, reaching out to the poor, the stranger, the lonely, and the “least of these.”

⁴ As retold by J.C. Austin, “Following Jesus Is for Losers” from *Day1.org*

The season of Lent is an appropriate time to intentionally focus on the ways that we choose to bear the cross of Jesus. Typically, we imagine Lenten disciplines to be self-focused: we give up things like chocolate or coffee or meat on Fridays; or else we take up a discipline of prayer or reading scripture. But, Lent can also be a time to remember that we are only who we are through the influence of and relationship with others. How might we express our thanks or deepen our connection with those around us? How can we better express our recognition that all people are created in the image of God?

With the question, “who do you say I am?” Jesus is at the same time asking, “who will you say that you are?” If we only had to provide an answer to Jesus’ question of *his* identity, we would all get it right. However, answering the question of Jesus’ identity means having to make a claim about our own. Because, who we are reveals who we have decided Jesus is. Jesus’ question was not just a test to see who could get the answer right. It’s an opportunity to come face-to-face with our identity, our commitment, the extent to which how we follow connects with who we believe Jesus to be.⁵

We gather as the church to practice following; helping one another affirm our identity as Jesus’ disciples, willing to deny anything that might keep us from losing our lives: be that our fears or anxieties, our status or our schedules, our need to be comfortable or in control; anything that keeps us from losing ourselves in the abundance of the grace that we receive, the love that we share, and the call to ministry that we fulfill. We gather because, by doing so, we are better prepared to be sent out – to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

⁵ Karoline Lewis, “Who Do You Say that I Am?”